

The Girl in the Tower

by SpookyMulder

<http://www.geocities.com/spookymulder841/Tower.html>

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Book One: Coming of Age

1. Harry Falls in Love

There was a small part of the roof that was covered, right near the doors to her rooms, and Sara sheltered there as the rain began. She held the Marauder's Map in one trembling hand, all but forgotten, and a half empty glass of wine in the other. She slid down the wall until she found the floor, not bothering to wipe away her tears. Taking a sip of her drink, she wondered why she did this to herself every night, playing her mother's old music recordings, crying away the dark, lonely hours. But tonight was special, the six month anniversary of her parent's death. Sara cried harder, and the rain came down in torrents.

She knew she'd had too much to drink and should go to sleep, but she feared the dark and the haunting figure that came to her with the shadows. It was worth staying up until dawn, she thought, if it would keep it away. There were spells cast, of course, but there's a way around almost everything. She didn't feel safe. It would come in eventually; not just hover outside the doors, and it was this she feared the most.

She felt so vulnerable, hidden away in her tower, alone and without the benefit of self-defense. She missed her *life*. She and her mother had been powerful witches, her father a more ordinary wizard and also a gifted clairvoyant, as Sara herself was. He always said it was his Gypsy blood.

The three of them had lived together as muggles in a fancy house in New York City, the very core of the modern world. She missed her many friends and all the fun they'd had. Crazy days spent yacht hopping in the harbor, nights hitting the scene, the theaters, museums, the galas, the premiers, the parties... All of that was over now. Her parents were gone and she had been torn from her life, only to experience the loneliness of solidarity, cowering in a tower in England. Hidden from the dark wizards that sought her for the destruction she knew she was capable of.

In her grief, Sara threw her glass at the wall where it shattered. She cursed her powers and the misery they'd brought her.

She glanced at the Marauder's Map and her thoughts turned to the boy she'd been watching since she'd arrived in October. The one she'd heard so much about.

Harry Potter had only just been born when his parents had helped hers escape to the United States during the dark times and Sara was born just after they arrived there. It was only a year later when the Potter's had met their fate. Sara felt close to Harry, even though they had never met, but she meant to change that soon. Only *he*, she thought, would understand this deep sadness. And only he could protect her from the darkness.

It was after hours at Hogwarts and all the students should have been asleep in their beds, but the Map told Sara that Harry was out at Hagrid's cabin, probably waiting for the rain to stop. "I'll try, Harry." She said aloud and did her best to stop crying. Only the harder she tried, the faster the tears fell, and the rain kept coming down.

As Sara watched the map, the words "Harry Potter" left Hagrid's and moved quickly across the grounds. Obviously, he'd made a break for it in the pouring rain. Another name was moving, that of the caretaker, Filch, and Sara saw he and Harry were practically on a collision course. She had to act fast, for even if Harry was able to hide, he would leave a tell-tale trail of puddles behind him, and she would be to blame.

Sara got to her feet and ran, trying not to stumble on the long, winding stair, and wishing she'd drank less wine that evening.

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She was soon passing the hidden entrance to Gryffindor Tower, then managed another staircase and ran full out down the hall. A quick check of the Map told her that Harry was inside and about to enter this very corridor, but Filch was only a few minutes from finding Harry's water trail. And Harry was moving slowly.

* * *

Harry couldn't believe his rotten luck. He'd gotten himself drenched sprinting back in the nightly torrential rain, he'd waited a good long time for it to let up, and now it stopped just as it had started. Suddenly. Pretty much as soon as he'd gotten indoors. His invisibility cloak was worthless if he was leaving wet footprints all the way to his bed. He'd be in trouble for sure, come morning.

As he considered what he could say in his defense, Harry rounded a corner and was suddenly flying backward, like he'd been hit by a train. He rolled once and sat upright, losing his cloak, and trying to catch his breath. Harry rubbed his elbow and winced, then straightened his glasses and to his surprise; a girl was sprawled on the floor across from him. She sat up and met his eyes with a warm, curious smile.

Harry found himself struggling for something to say. He just stared at her. He thought she was *stunning*. Long, platinum hair, with a black streak on one side, that fell into curls around her waist, the bluest eyes, and soft, fine features. Her skin looked like silk and was free of the common flaws of adolescence, though he didn't think she was any older than he was.

He noticed right away that her clothes were not that of a student. She wore a long skirt low on her hips and a shirt that rose above her waistline; a direct violation of school rules. She was barefoot. She wore no robe, and she'd recently been crying.

"I...I'm sorry." He managed to say at last.

"It's my fault." She said, "Come quickly. Filch is about to find us and you're dripping all over the floor." she said, "*Hurry!*"

Harry grabbed his wet invisibility cloak and asked no questions. Sara took his hand and pulled him along, as fast as she could run. Harry slowed as they neared the portrait of the fat lady in the pink dress, thinking he would be safest in his dorm, but Sara gave his hand a tug.

"This way!" She whispered and led him to her tower.

* * *

Once inside the base of the tower, Sara fell back against the door to catch her breath.

"You've got the Marauder's map." He said, "It was mine once, you know."

"I know." she said. "I'd been told as much." she held out her hand for Harry to shake. "I'm Sara, by the way."

Harry shook, thinking how soft her hand was against his, a little roughened from gripping his Quidditch broom. He let her hand slip away. "I'm Harry. Harry Potter." He said, expecting the reaction he got whenever he gave his name, but to his surprise, she showed no sign of amazement.

"It's nice to meet you Harry." she said as she led him to the stairs, where they sat a moment on the cold stone. "I've heard a lot about you, you know." She hesitated, "I've recently lost my parents, too. The same way it seems. At least that's what my uncle thinks." she lowered her eyes briefly before looking back at him, "Our parents were friends, Harry. With a common enemy."

"We all have a common enemy." Harry said. She gave a weak smile, and then looked suddenly alarmed.

"Well look at you. You're soaked! Harry, you'll be sick before you know it. Come to my room," she said, "I've got just the thing."

"I really should get back."

"Would you really deny me a little conversation? I rescued you after all. You owe me." She grinned.

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"Well, um, no. Of course not." Harry struggled.

"Alright then. To the top we go."

He stood and helped her up. She was several inches shorter than he was, but he was also wearing the required shoes. Her toes were painted, he noticed, and she wore gold around her toes and ankles.

Harry couldn't ever remember noticing a person's feet before, but hers were exquisite. In fact, everything about her was exquisite, he thought. Girls who looked like Sara never asked him to talk with them. They never asked him anything. On second thought, there were no girls at Hogwarts half as beautiful, but the prettiest ones ignored him completely. Harry's heart started to hammer away in his chest.

As they ascended the tower stair, he told her about his years at Hogwarts, rattled off a list of classes he was taking, and mentioned Ron and Hermione here and there, too. Sara talked about life in Manhattan, but eluded most of his questions with finesse. She had an easy, musical laugh, which Harry liked, and a way of looking at him that made Harry want to melt into a puddle at her feet. She was so casual, like they were old friends, and he began to relax. In fact, it was impossible not to. He felt like he'd known her forever.

Harry fell silent as they approached the door at the top, which she stopped at and opened. She led him in.

Her "room" turned out to be full living quarters with a very cozy parlor, decorated in deep purple velvet. They walked next into a large chamber that held an elaborate bed, draped with purple silk and trimmed with gold. There was a rug over most of the marble, which gleamed in the light of the fire.

The far wall was lined with many sets of doors, open to receive the gentle night breeze. Billowy curtains of lavender and white floated and swirled. Beyond them was an immense walled rooftop.

Harry began to get nervous.

"Who are you, really?" He asked, looking around at the lavish rooms, so expensively decorated.

"Sara Lemke."

"Are you a teacher?"

"I'm only sixteen, same as you. How could I possibly be a *teacher*?"

"You're definitely not a student."

"No. Not a student." A *refugee*, she thought. A *prisoner*.

"Then how do you come to be here? And *how* did you get *this room*?"

"Uncle Albus. He sent Severus to bring me back here. No one knows, Harry. No one except you."

"*Uncle Albus*? Dumbledore is your *Uncle*?"

"Yes, my great, great uncle, on my mother's side."

"And he thinks you're in danger."

"Perhaps. Better to be safe, I guess."

"Was it, you know," he lowered his voice, "*Voldemort*?"

"No one knows for certain." Sara turned away briefly, and then looked at Harry again. He could see the start of tears in her eyes and thought he'd better not ask any more questions. Thunder rumbled in the distance. *More rain*, he thought, *great*.

"Give me your cloak. I'll dry it by the fire."

Harry quickly handed her the dripping garment. Sara hung it from a rack she'd brought over, draped a light blanket around his shoulders, and then poured them both a drink. Harry was shocked to see it was from a bottle of white wine. They weren't allowed spirits at Hogwarts, either. He took the glass anyway, and tasted it. It was dry, but he liked its smooth, bittersweet taste.

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"It's a Riesling. I brought with me, hidden in my bag," she said, "I put a spell on it. The bottle never empties, so have all you want. It will warm you up."

"Thanks," Harry said, "It's very good." He almost said he'd never had wine before, but restrained himself.

Sara crossed the room and switched on a stereo. Slow, smoky music, melancholy and stirring, suddenly filled the room. A woman's voice, singing soft and low, touched his ears and Harry listened. It was jazz, he thought, or something you'd hear in a lounge on a corner in some big city. He loved it, he knew, it touched something somewhere inside, in the heart or in the soul, somewhere between sadness and something else. Harry hadn't heard music since he'd left the Dursley's half a year ago, but it had never affected him in such a way before.

"Why don't you come out?" She indicated the doors to the roof, "Your hair will dry faster out here."

Harry followed her out, carrying his glass, watching her as she led him to a couple of patio chairs, a small table between them. She stopped once at a scattering of broken glass and spoke the word "*Reparo*". The glass became whole at once, without the use of a wand, and she walked on, leaving it there, strangely out of place. Harry was impressed, but said nothing. He sat and sipped the wine before setting his glass down.

He watched her sip her wine, noticing how perfect was the hand that held the glass, covered in rings and a bracelet on her wrist. Her nails were long and manicured. She watched him in return, finally setting the drink on the table. She said nothing for a long moment, just held his gaze, and then asked for his hand.

If Harry was a little taken aback by this, he didn't show it. He held his hand out immediately. She took it and turned the palm up, resting it on her knee. She appeared deep in thought as she ran the tip of one nail along the lines of his hand. It was something he remembered from Professor Trelawney's Divination class. She was reading his palm.

"Great tragedy in your life," she said, "but then we knew that. A difficult childhood. Someone lied to you," she glanced at him, "Mysteries revealed. Answers to deeply troubling questions at long last. You've come close to death more than once."

"Can you see my future?" he wondered. "Am I going to die soon? Professor Trelawney sure thinks I am."

She laughed. "Hardly, Harry. You've many adventures ahead. You will face your mortal enemy on three occasions here, here," she indicated a spot in the crease of his palm, "and here. I don't like telling the future, Harry. I don't think it's relevant."

"It's okay." He said, expecting her to drop his hand, but instead she studied another of his lines.

"This is strange." Sara said and looked over her own palm, then at Harry.

"What's strange?"

"It's nothing," Sara said and stood up, turning to lift her wine glass before wandering over to the edge of the roof. Harry looked at the line she'd been studying last. His love line. He didn't ask. He finished his drink.

"I thought I saw something last night," she admitted with her back to Harry, "I couldn't be sure, it was so dark and I'd only just woken up, but I think something was standing in the door there."

"What did it look like?" Harry asked.

"A black hooded figure. Then it was gone."

"Have you ever seen it before last night?"

"I'm not sure. I thought I'd seen it in New York a few times, but it could be only the remnant of a dream. I don't know why I brought it up."

"Because it troubles you, and you don't really think it's a dream. I think you should tell Dumbledore."

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"No. Not unless I was sure."

"But you shouldn't stay here. Ask for another room."

"And give all this up?" she indicated their surroundings, "Besides, he would know in an instant."

"Then close the doors at night. At least do that."

"Perhaps you're right, Harry. Would you like another?" She indicated his empty glass, "I'll get the bottle."

"No," Harry said, getting up, "I'll get it."

* * *

"I can't have any more. I'm sorry, but I seem to be having trouble with my feet," Harry smiled, "And I should get back to Gryffindor. Ron will think I'm dead by now." He stood, but Sara blocked his path, standing maddeningly close. There were maybe two inches between them and he had a sudden and intense desire to kiss her.

She held his eyes and laid a hand on his arm. "Sleep here. You'll be in a lot of trouble if you're caught stumbling about the halls at this hour. Besides, if the shadow comes back, I'll feel a lot safer with *you* around, Harry Potter, drunk or not." she put a hand to his face and brushed her thumb lightly across his scar.

"But..." Harry stammered, moving his arm to take the hand that rested there as his heart thudded in his

chest. The candles were dim, blotting out the rest of the world and she wrapped her fingers around his. Sara stepped in, eliminating the gap between them until Harry thought he could hear the sounds of her fine, silken clothes brushing against his rough cotton shirt. "*Don't worry,*" she whispered. "No one will find you here."

"I don't think it's a good idea." He reasoned, whispering painfully as the rest of him cried out stay, to see *what happened*. She was so beautiful in this light, he thought, in *any* light, and the way she looked at him was what it meant to be caught in the moment. "We've only just met. It wouldn't be proper of me... plus I think I'm intoxicated." His arm went around her waist, but then he realized what he was doing, and pulled it back to hang at his side.

Sara stepped back, dropping his hand. "You are." She grinned, "But so am I."

Harry smiled and allowed her to lead him to the sofa before the fire.

* * *

Harry awoke with a start. His head was heavy, but his scar burned. He pressed his hand to it and winced. It took a moment to remember where he was and then he heard her frantic whisper.

"Harry!" she called from her bed, "Harry, it's there!"

Harry rose from the sofa, the back of which faced her bed, trying to shake off sleep. He glanced at Sara under her blankets, then to the open doors. A hooded figure, barely distinguishable in the shadows, lingered just outside and he could feel its menace. As Harry drew near its hiss was unmistakable, something he remembered well and still heard in his darkest dreams. It vanished into the shadows, blending seamlessly with the night.

Harry looked to Sara, her knees drawn up, the sheets pulled to her chin. She was trembling.

"Harry, did you see it?"

"Yes, unless we're both dreaming," he said, glancing back to where the figure had been. "I don't think you imagined that. Not at all."

"Is it gone?"

"Yes. My scar doesn't hurt anymore."

"Good." She said, visibly relaxing. "Would you stay with me? Just for a little while?"

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"Perhaps we should close the doors."

"No," she said. "It's gone. It's afraid of you, I think. Good thing," she moved across the bed, making room for him, "Please, Harry, just for a moment."

He sat on the bed, close to the edge and just looked at her.

"Lay back. Put your arms around me."

Harry did as she asked, no longer feeling awkward. She was scared, that's all. Sara curled up to him, her head on his shoulder, his arms wrapped around her. She smelled fantastic and her warmth comforted him. She was trembling and, not knowing what to do, he hesitantly stroked her hair. In response, Sara slid a hand over his chest until her arm lay across it and snuggled a little closer. Harry thought he would go mad with the nearness of her.

He lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling as she drifted off, until his eyes became heavy and closed.

* * *

"Harry. *Harry!*"

Harry opened his eyes in the gloom of early morning. Sara looked down on him, propped on her elbow, her right arm still draped across his chest. She whispered sweetly to him.

"You should go back now. The castle will be stirring soon. You'll want to be in your bed when it does."

"Huh? Oh. Yes." Harry peered up at her pretty face in the near dark, not wanting to move at all. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to fall asleep here."

"It's okay. Best night's sleep I've had in a long time, Harry. I'm glad you were here." She gave him a warm smile. "Can you come back the night after next?"

"Of course I can."

"Come after lights out."

"I will."

"I'll see you then. But for now you *have* to go." She kissed his cheek. He smiled for a moment, and then slipped from the bed. He collected his cloak, slipped on his shoes, passed through the door quietly and hurried back to Gryffindor.

He found the dorms silent as he crept through to his room. A quick check behind the curtains surrounding his bed revealed that Ron was fast asleep. Harry changed into his pajamas quickly, drew his own curtains, and then simply lay there, thinking of Sara. He recalled his arm around her in the dark, her slow breath warm on his neck, and her sleeping head on his shoulder. He rolled onto his side and hugged the pillow. It would be two days until he saw her again.

* * *

"Harry!" Ron whispered, looking in at Harry, "Where the bloody hell were *you* last night? I woke up at three in the morning and you weren't in your bed. I almost went to McGonagall and said I thought you'd been *killed!*"

Harry had intended all along to tell Ron about his night with Sara, but decided instantly to lie. "I got lost." He said.

"Lost!" Ron laughed, "After *six years!*"

Harry shrugged his shoulders.

"You look *terrible*, you know." Ron said.

"I'm okay." Harry lied, "just tired."

"Well you'd better get up. You'll be late for breakfast."

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Harry got up and began to dress, thinking breakfast sounded simply awful, but he was very thirsty and could think of nothing but the pitchers of pumpkin juice that would line the table. He thought he might drink them all. He also knew that the next time he saw Sara he wouldn't be drinking as much wine. He felt *terrible*.

* * *

Much to the annoyance of Ron and Hermione, Harry couldn't stop thinking of Sara. He missed whole conversations, only to be asked a question to which he couldn't respond. In Potions he'd made the mistake of daydreaming during one of Snape's lectures and when called upon Harry didn't know what to say. Snape had done his best to humiliate him in front of the class, and Harry had slumped in his seat, defeated.

* * *

He'd followed Ron and Hermione back to Gryffindor Tower after dinner, and they settled around a table in the common room. Harry opened a book to study, but never read a word, only stared at the pages, thinking of Sara and how he could possibly get through another day without talking to her. How he longed to sneak off to her tower, if only to say hello.

"HARRY!"

Harry looked up to find Ron looking at him and Hermione glaring.

"What is *wrong* with you?" Hermione demanded. "You've been out to lunch *all day*."

"I'm just tired." Harry said and tried to smile, "I think I might be coming down with something. I'm sorry."

"He looked really *awful* this morning" Ron told Hermione, who quickly softened her tone.

"Perhaps you should go to bed, then. You've got the whole weekend to study."

"Yes," Harry agreed, "I think I will." He gathered up his books and stood, "I'll see you at breakfast." he told Hermione.

"I hope you feel better, Harry. Get some rest." she said.

He raised a hand to Ron, who waved back, and went up the stairs. He got into bed without bothering with pajamas and was soon asleep.

* * *

When Harry awoke it was full dark. He heard muffled snoring coming from the other four boys in the room and wondered what had woken him. Then he heard it. A gentle song on the wind, drifting in through the window. It sounded the way angels must sound when they sang, melodic and unrestrained, lovely. He recognized her voice at once and sat up, listening.

Suddenly Harry had to go back to her tower. He had to see her tonight, *forget* that she'd asked him to come tomorrow. He wouldn't stay long, not unless she wanted him to. But he *had* to go.

Harry slipped on his shoes and quietly took his invisibility cloak from the trunk at the end of the bed, pulling it on and over his head.

It wasn't far from Gryffindor House to Sara's tower and he ran most of the way. However, when he reached the door at its base he stopped and fell back into the shadows. Someone was coming.

* * *

Sara stepped back from the edge of the roof and closed her mother's spell book. She held it to her, hoping the spell she'd cast on her song would work, though the prospect of knowing frightened her a little and her pulse was quick. What she'd seen in Harry's palm simply couldn't be wrong, but perhaps she'd seen something because she wanted it more than *anything*? Maybe something that wasn't really there. Maybe the comfort she felt in his presence, the way her heart pounded when she looked at him was adolescence, not destiny.

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According to the book, if the spell was sung softly into the wind on a clear, starry night while the moon was at one quarter crescent, something amazing and magical would occur. It was the very spell that had brought her mother's true love so many years ago. Sara had heard the story many times and could only hope it worked so well on *this* night! If she hadn't botched it, her song would awaken the one who would truly love her and lead him to where she was. "It *has* to be him." she whispered, "He *must* be the one."

Sara regarded the book one last time before replacing it on the shelf next to an ancient Romanian text called *Celestira*. She glanced at the Marauder's Map, folded on the desk, and ignored it. She wouldn't refer to it tonight. She opened the door to the stairs, turned on some music, poured another glass of wine, and went back onto the roof to wait. She sipped and sang the gentle verses in Latin, wondering if he would really come. She had her doubts. She liked him so much and he was such a *gentleman*. It simply couldn't be this easy, but she had to know. She had to give him this test.

Sara turned at the voice, utterly disappointed. She regarded the over-confident, impossibly blonde primadonna standing near the doors between the roof and her rooms, thinking he had the most arrogant countenance, as well as a dark, disturbing aura. She said nothing and didn't smile.

"Forgive the intrusion, but I thought I heard singing. I followed it here." He looked around, lingering on the candle-lit room through which he had come. "It's nicer than I would have thought."

"Must have been my stereo you heard. I'm sorry to have disturbed you, Mr...."

"Malfoy. It's Draco, actually. And *you* are?"

"Tired, Mr. Malfoy. It was nice meeting you, but if you don't mind, I was just about to turn in." He

was taller than she was and extraordinarily good looking, flashy, and well-manicured. Sara immediately assumed he was rich.

"That was no stereo I heard." Malfoy said, taking a few steps closer to her. "And what is your name? You still haven't told me."

"It's Sara." she said, "Goodnight, Mr. Malfoy."

"What's the hurry?" he asked. "I think you could stay up awhile longer."

"I said *goodnight*."

Malfoy took a few more presumptuous steps forward, never averting his icy blue-gray eyes. Sara stepped away, but a small part of her wanted to see what would happen. She did her best to ignore it. He came within a foot of her as she backed into the wall of the roof.

"I don't like it when people are rude to me. Especially for no reason. But I suppose I could forget it if you'll see me tomorrow."

"No."

He placed a hand atop the wall on either side of her waist, his sly grin subsiding as he leaned closer.

"We could be *friends*, you know."

"I have no need of overly-pretentious friends." Sara said, irritated by his lack of tact, but somehow wishing he would get untactfully *closer*. His cologne, and his dangerous proximity, captivated her senses. He was only inches from her, his hand caressed her face and Sara's breath caught in her throat. She meant to be stern when she spoke, but her words were barely more than a whisper. "I want you to leave, *Draco Malfoy*."

"And what if I would rather stay here with you?" He asked as his arm went around her waist and he pulled her sharply against him.

Sara dropped her wine and the glass shattered at their feet, barely noticed. She said nothing as something foreign raged inside her, some dark curiosity that brought her suddenly to life. It felt like a potion that warmed from the inside out, racing through her veins like liquid fire. "Let go of me." She said and pushed him away, trying to catch her breath, wondering what had just happened. "I said I want you to leave."

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Malfoy gave her a smug grin.

"You're offensive."

"I know." He smiled. "So I've been told."

"And there's darkness in you." She told him, "You're evil on some level and it *radiates*. You frighten me. I want you to leave."

Malfoy seemed somewhat upset by this, and concurred with a brief nod, his arrogance all but gone.

"*I'm not my father*." He whispered and walked to the door that led down the stairs, where he stopped and turned, his confidence back in evidence. "I'll visit you again, Sara." He said. "Tomorrow perhaps."

"I'm very busy if you don't mind." She said and closed the door on him. She fell heavily against it, her disappointment overwhelming. *Why couldn't it be?* Sara thought.

* * *

Harry stayed in the shadows as he watched Malfoy come and go, furious at the thought of Draco in her rooms. And it explained why she'd asked to see him tomorrow instead of tonight. Because she already had plans to see Malfoy.

Feeling betrayed, Harry made his way back to his bed in Gryffindor Tower, put on his pajamas and climbed in. It was raining again and he was glad. It reflected the way he felt.

He lay awake most of the night, falling asleep only after the rain stopped.

* * *

Being that there were no classes on Saturday and Harry was alone (Ron and Hermione thought he was sick and headed off to the library together,) Harry thought he would pass by Sara's tower before lunch. Half of him didn't want to see her, but the other half wanted an explanation. Just before he arrived there, he heard voices and concealed himself in his hiding place of last night. It was Malfoy again. He sounded angry and Harry listened.

"How can you say you don't like me? You haven't even gotten to know me yet." Malfoy said as he backed Sara into a corner. "You could at least give me a *chance*."

"I don't *want* to give you a chance! I know your kind. A future Death Eater if I ever saw one. You've got evil in your eyes, Mr. Malfoy. I want you to leave me alone."

"You *can* call me Draco."

"I'd rather not."

Malfoy drew closer until he was only inches from her. Sara pushed back into the corner, clutching the book she held to her chest, with nowhere else to go. She was shaking. With rage or fear Harry didn't know.

"Enough with this *game* you're playing." Malfoy said, "It's annoying."

"It's *what*? You have your nerve!"

Harry stood in disbelief as Malfoy moved to kiss her. He looked away, feeling more shattered than ever. Didn't she know he was crazy about her? That he couldn't stop thinking about her? Perhaps he'd been mistaken when he thought she liked him, too. Maybe the friendly little kiss she'd given him was only that. *Friendly*.

All of a sudden, there was a tremor that shook the floor and nearly toppled Harry over. He thought they were having an earthquake and grabbed the wall, unfortunately losing his vantage point. There was a strange *zap!* and a flash, then a solid thud. He turned to see Malfoy on the floor; something like

electricity clung to him, and then dissipated. Sara stood over him in a rage. The floor still shook and Harry noticed that the black streak in Sara's hair had gone a violent red. Her voice trembled as she spoke through clenched teeth. "If you touch me again, I'll *kill* you!"

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"How dare you use that *sorceress* magic on me!?" Malfoy seethed, getting to his feet, "That *hurt*. My *father* will hear of this. And you can kiss Hogwarts goodbye."

Harry's heart practically stopped. Could Lucius really manage that? In the midst of Harry's worry, Sara spit in Malfoy's face. Harry immediately gripped the handle of his wand.

Draco's face turned bright red with anger. He muttered something Harry couldn't quite hear and Sara backed into the corner once more, clutching a tattered old book, as if for protection. The streak was black again, as though it hadn't changed and Harry wondered if it really had.

Just as anticipated, Malfoy drew his wand.

Harry rushed into the corridor. "*Expelliarmus!*" he yelled.

Malfoy's wand flew from his hand. He turned and came face to face with Harry.

"What are *you* doing here, *Potter*?"

"Harry!" Sara said with relief. She ran from the corner and hid behind him, resting her hand on his shoulder, peeking over it at Draco. "Harry, *thank God*."

"Is *that* it?" Malfoy fumed, "You like *Potter*?!"

Harry answered for her. "Get lost, Malfoy."

"Or what? Do you think you scare me? Do you really think I'll just run away because you pulled out your wand?"

"I could just give you a black eye the old fashioned way."

"Oh shove off, Potter." Malfoy muttered as he collected his wand, which had come to rest against the wall. "The two of *you* deserve each other." With that Malfoy hurried away, almost staggering with pain, and they watched until he was out of sight.

Sara turned and threw her arms around Harry's neck. Harry hadn't expected such sudden affection, but wrapped his arms around her and hugged her back. She wore an intoxicating perfume, which he liked a great deal. Her hair felt like silken threads against his skin and the way she pressed against him produced a funny feeling in his stomach. He liked having her so close and was disappointed when she pulled away. Sara let her hand slip down to hold his. He smiled down at her, feeling a bit stupid for thinking she was meeting Malfoy at night.

"Harry, you've saved me twice in as many days!" Sara smiled up at him, "Perhaps I should keep you around *all* the time." Her smile faltered when she remembered that he hadn't heard her song. "I mean, if I could."

"Did he hurt you last night, Sara?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'd heard singing. I followed it here and saw Malfoy go into your tower. I thought..."

"You heard singing? *Really*?" Sara asked.

"Yes."

Instantly she was hugging him again. "Harry!" She said, "That's the *best* news."

"Was it you?" he asked, puzzled by her sudden relief.

"Yes. Only Malfoy heard it, too. I had a time of it getting rid of him, but he left eventually. No, he didn't hurt me." she pulled away and held his hand again, "He's *vile*, Harry. I despised him before I even looked at him. It's in his voice, the *treachery*. He'll be a Death Eater before you know it."

"You certainly wouldn't have trouble convincing anyone of that." Harry agreed, "Sara, are you alright?"

"Yes. He did no harm. You came along before he could."

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An awkward silence passed, and then Harry spoke. "You look nice today. But don't you ever wear shoes?"

She laughed and glanced at her bare feet. "Of course I do. But why here? Why bother?"

"Well, you *do* have very nice feet."

Sara laughed. "Why thank you, Mr. Potter. I'm quite flattered. Now I was on my way to the dungeons when that *Malfoy* came by. I left the damn map upstairs, I mean, who wants to climb all the way back up? But if I had I would have seen him coming." she said, "Why don't you walk with me? I have to see Professor Snape about a potion or two. Were you in a hurry, Harry?"

"No. In fact I was coming by to see you." Harry explained, "But I'll wait outside. Snape hates me. And he's especially upset since I wasn't paying attention in class on Thursday and screwed up my potion. I doubt he's over it yet."

"Daydreaming were you?" She grinned, "What about?"

"Nothing." Harry blushed. Sara smiled as she took his arm and led him down the corridor, then into a hidden passage that wasn't even on the Marauder's Map.

When they neared Snape's classroom, Sara released Harry's arm and left him outside the door. She knocked twice, entered, and was out of sight. "Good morning, Severus!" she beamed.

Harry had to struggle not to laugh as he listened to their conversation. He'd never heard Snape talk to anyone like this, so out of character. He was trying to be nice. And Sara helped him along quite gracefully, Harry thought.

"How are you, my dear?" Harry heard Snape say. "You're well I hope?"

"I'm just fine, Severus, Thank you." Sara said, "And how have you been? I haven't seen you in *days*."

"I know. I was planning to visit you this afternoon, but I see you've found me first. As for how I am? Considering the fact that I have absolutely *no* talented students, I'd say I'm doing rather well." Snape hesitated, "You know, you're most welcome to sit in on my classes if it will get you out of that tower. I'm sure I could arrange something. A polyjuice potion perhaps."

"Thank you, Severus. I may take you up on that. I'll bet you're a very interesting teacher, but you mustn't worry. I'm perfectly happy in my tower. However, I do need your assistance."

"Of course. Whatever you need."

"First, there's the matter of a memory charm. You see, I was singing last night."

"I know," Snape said, "You put me to sleep. Actually, I've heard that song once before. You have a beautiful voice, my dear. I believe your Mother would be proud."

Sara fell silent for a moment, then cleared her throat and went on. "Thank you. Well, a student found his way into my room. He said his name was Draco Malfoy."

"And did Mr. Malfoy cause you any...undue stress?"

"No. But I'd prefer it if he did not come back."

"I assure you, I will deal with the problem. He won't bother you again. And was there something else?"

"Just a few simple potions. Perhaps you're familiar with them. I found them in my Mother's book."

Here," She handed him the book, "I've marked the pages. There's no hurry."

"It does seem I am familiar with some of these, my dear. I created a few of them for your mother while we were still in school. The others look easy enough. I will bring them as soon as they're ready."

"Send an elf. I'd hate to impose."

"It would be my pleasure. And you can be assured I will look after *this*." He indicated the old book.
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"There are very few people I would trust with that, Professor, but I'm sure you will see it safely back to me."

"You can rely on it. If there's anything else you need..."

"You've done enough already." Sara said "I should be getting back, though. Thank you again, Severus. It was nice seeing you."

"The pleasure was mine, my dear."

When Sara found Harry in the hall, his face was red from his silent laughter.

"Oh shut up, Harry." Sara said with a smile.

She left him halfway between his tower and hers.

"Promise you'll visit me tonight."

"I will." He said, "After lights out."

"I'll put a spell on the door. Let yourself in. I'll wait for you on the roof." She said, holding his hand again.

After little thought, he bent and kissed her cheek. She smiled sweetly up at him and he was reminded again of how beautiful she was.

"I'll see you later, Sara." He whispered.

"I certainly hope so." she said. She squeezed his hand before letting it go and walked away. She looked back before she turned the corner and waved to Harry, who still stood where she'd left him, watching her go.

* * *

Weeks passed and Harry was falling asleep in classes all the time. He had been sent to the hospital wing more than once, as this was not his usual behavior. He had taken to avoiding Ron as much as possible, for his questions about Harry's nightly absences were becoming too trying. Hermione demanded to know what he was doing on a daily basis. Breakfast began every day with "Okay, *where were you last night, Harry?*" and the two of them glaring at him for keeping a secret. At the moment, neither of them was speaking to him. He knew he would have to tell them eventually, or risk losing his friends.

* * *

One Saturday he awoke to Ron and Hermione standing over his bed. Harry reached for his glasses, put them on, and straightened up. "Good morning." He said.

"*Morning?!*" Ron bellowed.

"Harry, it's one-thirty." Hermione informed him, "You've missed breakfast *and* lunch. Harry, we demand to know what's going on. Why are you always so tired?"

"Yeah," Ron added, "And where the bloody hell are you getting off to half the night? You come in at dawn, Harry, and you sleep in your clothes!"

"I promised I wouldn't tell anyone." Harry explained, "Besides, you'll just laugh."

"Well we're not laughing *now*." Ron fumed.

"We want to know." Hermione demanded.

They stood there, resolute, waiting for an explanation.

Harry sighed. "I've been seeing a girl."

"*A girl!?*" Ron laughed. "Is *that* all? Change your mind about Cho Chang, did you?"

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"*No!*" Harry blushed.

Hermione nudged Ron with her elbow and gave him a stern look. Ron stopped laughing, but continued to grin at Harry. "I think it's wonderful." Hermione said and sat on the edge of the bed, facing Harry.

"Who is she? Is it someone we know?"

"Her name is Sara. She's Dumbledore's niece." He told them. "He thinks she's in danger, so he's hiding her. You can't tell anyone. No one's supposed to know she's here."

"What are friends for?" asked Hermione. "We won't tell anyone, Harry. But you shouldn't keep secrets from your friends."

"We were getting rather *worried*," added Ron, who was no longer grinning.

"So," said Hermione, "When do we get to meet her?"

"I don't know." Harry said, immensely relieved to finally tell them, "I'll talk to her about it. I just hope she isn't angry."

* * *

It was easier to see Sara with Ron's assistance. Harry was able to leave shortly after dinner and Ron put pillows under Harry's blankets and drew the curtains around his bed.

Sara's door swung itself open on Harry's approach, as it had every night since she'd put the spell on it. (Harry had secretly put a spell on the door not to admit Malfoy) There was music playing, as there always was, but the voice that sang was Sara's. Harry stood, listening for a long time in the doors to the roof, the silk curtains billowing around him. Her voice was moving and angelic, perfect. The same voice he'd heard on the wind one night a month before.

She smiled when she turned and saw him there, the setting sun blazing behind her. Harry thought she had never looked so beautiful and he just stood there, smiling back at her. He wished she would go on singing, but she came toward him instead. She wrapped her arms around him easily, as she had done so many times, and rested her head on his shoulder. "I'm glad you're here." She said.

Her perfume found him and he breathed it in, the way he did every night as he lay next to her, his arm around her shoulders, until the first light of dawn. He kissed her and she melted against him as the butterflies fluttered in his stomach, a feeling he'd grown accustomed to, but couldn't ignore. He pulled away a bit and she clung to him.

"Don't stop," Sara sighed, "It's so nice."

"I have to," he said regrettably.

"I know." She said and released him, turning back toward the wall. Resting her elbows on it. Harry noticed the black streak in her hair, which had once been profound, was almost gone. He was curious about it, but never asked. There were so many questions, it seemed, he could never ask them all.

"What did you see in my palm that day?" Harry asked, remembering the curiosity he'd seen in her. It was one of the more troubling questions and he was relieved to finally voice it. "Whatever you saw that was so interesting?"

"Look," she said and turned back to him. She held up her palm for him to inspect, then took his and positioned it next to hers. "Do you see? Our love lines are identical."

"They do look quite similar, don't they?" Harry asked, studying them.

"Not similar, Harry, *Exactly the same*."

"But what does it mean? I don't understand."

"I'm not sure," she whispered. "But I think it's a good sign."

She looked at him and drew closer. He felt her arms wrap around him again. Her eyes closed as she lifted her chin and his lips meet hers. She sighed and he pulled her close, and the flutter in his stomach turned into something else. Something much sweeter.

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2. Ka-tet

Friday night Ron and Harry were in the best of spirits and, to their surprise, Hermione looked fabulous, though maybe a little nervous. Her usually bushy hair was smoothed and curled. She was wearing make-up and a pretty summer dress that floated around her knees when she moved and her sandals had heels. Uncertainty edged her voice.

"Do I look ok?"

"You look *nice*, Hermione," Harry said, nudging Ron a little with his elbow.

Ron was staring at her. "Yes," he stammered, "Very nice."

"Well thank you both." She smiled with delight, "Should we be off, then?"

* * *

People stopped to stare at Hermione as they passed on their way to the dining hall. No one had seen her look the way she looked since the Tri-Wizard Ball and now that she was two years older and no longer a child, she was actually quite attractive.

They made their way to Sara's tower, making sure no one was about before they went in. The door was already open when they arrived at the top of the stairs and they stepped through to find Sara on the sofa in the sitting room, reading *The Daily Prophet*. She stood at once and came over to greet them with a bright smile.

Remembering his manners, Harry introduced Hermione and then Ron. Sara shook their hands. "It's so nice to meet you both at last!" Sara said with delight, "Harry's told me all about you, of course."

"It's nice to meet *you*, Sara!" Hermione beamed, "Harry spoke so highly of you."

Harry blushed, but didn't know why exactly.

Ron tipped his head in serious consideration as he regarded her. "You don't *look* much like Dumbledore."

Sara erupted with enchanting, musical laughter. "Yes, I'm still waiting for my beard to grow in." She scratched her chin, "Come on, guys. Let's go out."

She led them onto the roof, where they would be having an open-air dinner since the warm spring weather was perfect for it.

Harry remembered to pull out Sara's chair and Ron, in the middle of arranging his own chair, saw what Harry was doing and hurried to do the same for Hermione. He gave her angry glance an apologetic smile. They settled around a square table, set for four, and a house elf poured them each a glass of wine. Hermione sipped hers rather daintily, but Ron took a big gulp and went a bit white.

"A little *shocking* at first, isn't it?" Ron said aloud, grimacing.

Hermione rolled her eyes, "It's not *water*. You have to sip it."

"I knew that." Ron blushed with embarrassment, "I just *forgot*, I guess."

"Hermione," Sara said as she held her glass, "That's a pretty dress you're wearing."

"Thank you." Hermione smiled, "But not as nice as *yours*. Students aren't allowed to dress that way. In fact, I leave most of my summer clothes at home."

"There are no such rules in *this* particular tower." Sara smiled, "In fact, we look about the same size."

You're welcome to borrow anything of mine that you like."

"*Seriously?*" Hermione asked, unable to hide her delight.

"Certainly! In fact, why don't you come for lunch tomorrow? I wanted to talk to you anyway. Harry says you're good with spells."

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"I'd love to," Hermione smiled, "And I'd be happy to help you with any spells you require."

"Great!" Sara said as two house elves arrived with dinner. Soon after they were served Ron looked astonished, finally looking to Sara for an explanation.

"How did you *get* this?" he asked with his mouth half full, "This is *fabulous!*"

"It's Romanian. Actually, it's a recipe handed down through my father's family. He descended from Gypsies." Sara explained, "I sent an owl to the kitchen earlier and asked them to prepare it. I'm glad you like it."

Ron plowed through two more courses and dessert, each as good as the last in his opinion, occasionally forgetting to sip and reliving the shock each time. He went through several glasses before Sara suggested he have some water to thin it out.

Sara retired her usual rapturous, honey-toned music in exchange for something a little more festive, turning it up rather loud. She started to dance with Hermione, who was getting a little giggly. Between Harry and Ron, they decided that around Sara, Hermione was like another person. Fun-loving, easygoing, almost adventurous. Three glasses of wine helped, they were sure, but she was *different*.

Definitely not the nerdy, bookworm pal they were so accustomed to and it wasn't long before Sara had her in the dressing room, trying on clothes.

Ron wandered over to the wall and Harry followed. They stood there in silence for a moment, looking out over the grounds until Ron gave a heavy sigh.

"What's wrong, Ron?"

"Harry? Do you think Hermione's pretty at all?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders, "I guess so. But Hermione is just...*Hermione*. I don't really look at her that way."

"Well *I* do." Ron admitted, "But I believe she thinks the way you do."

"Cheer up, Ron." Harry smiled, "I think she likes you."

"*Really?*" Ron said, coming to life a little, "What makes you say that?"

"I can just tell."

Laughter neared and Ron and Harry turned to see Hermione crossing the roof with Sara. They were lightly clinging to each other, slopping their wine here and there, not seeming to notice, and stumbling a little. Hermione was wearing a typical Sara outfit and Harry noticed she had lost her shoes somewhere. The both of them were barefoot.

"It's a little silly," Ron smiled, "the way you two are carrying on."

"Then I think you need some more wine, Mr. Weasley." Sara said and brought the bottle over, full as if no one had poured a drop. She filled Ron's glass, and then touched hers to it. Ron took another big swallow, but no longer seemed to be reacting to it at all. "And *you*, Mr. Potter," she said and held out the bottle, "you look like you could use one as well." Harry smiled as he held up his glass, which she filled, spilling most of it all over his hand.

Sara set her glass on the wall and leaned heavily against Harry, who was glad to have something holding him up. "I think *I* may need a glass of water soon." She said as the music faded to something slow and rhythmic. "But first I think we should dance. *Come on.*" She took his hand and he set his glass next to hers on the wall, laughing a little because he'd only danced with a girl once, at the Triwizard ball.

He placed a hand on her back and took hers with the other. "Perhaps you should wear shoes, Sara." he said, "I'm *sure* to step on your feet."

"Then I'll just step on yours." She smiled, and laid her head on his shoulder, letting her eyes fall languorously closed. "You'll do just fine, Harry. I can see the future you know, and there are no broken toes in it."

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Hermione looked at Ron, who just stood there, looking back, not knowing how to proceed. He opened his mouth once, but closed it again; too afraid she'd just laugh at him.

"I guess it's ladies choice." she said, matter-of-fact, "would you care to, Ron?"

"I'm not very good." Ron said, then lowered his voice and bent a little closer, "But I'd be the *luckiest* guy here."

Hermione smiled and blushed as they began to dance. They were both unsteady and she moved in a

little closer, holding onto him for support. He held her a little tighter, but still there was a space between them that neither would close.

* * *

Hermione was up early the next morning, putting spells on her hair and attempting to apply make-up, borrowed from Parvati Patil. She'd tried on everything she owned at least twice and in every possible combination, finally settling on her usual boring Saturday attire, but she was miserable about it.

By the time Harry and Ron wandered into the common room, looking positively ill, she had already eaten breakfast, gone to the library and researched a spell to make her nails grow, although she didn't have any polish and all the girls had already gone. She'd left her own at home, along with everything else she wished she had at the moment.

"You've *got* to be kidding me!" Ron moaned, when he saw her, "How can you look so bloody *chipper*? I really hate you sometimes, Hermione." Ron said and smiled at her before slumping onto the sofa. Harry sat across from him, misery on his face.

"Harry, I simply *adore* Sara." Hermione beamed; glad they were able to speak freely. Everyone else was outside, enjoying the beautiful day. "She's so *different*. I can see why you like her." she said,

"Besides; I don't think I could pick a better girlfriend for you if I tried."

"Thank you." Harry said, pleased, and somewhat relieved that Hermione had found a friend in Sara.

"I like her, too, Harry." Ron said, "I haven't had that much fun in, well, *ever*. She's really great. But what the bloody hell is she doing with you?" Ron laughed as best he could and Harry found the energy to throw a pillow at him.

"Well, I brought you two some toast from breakfast." Hermione announced, getting up, "I thought you might be a little hungry. It's cold by now, though. Besides, lunch is only an hour away. I'm sure by then you will have come around enough to go down. Drink some water for now. It should help."

Ron moaned. "If I thought I could get up, I'd go stick my head in the lake. Really, I've never been so *thirsty*."

"Oh *Ron*." she said and left the room. When she came back she had a pitcher of cold water and two glasses, which she set on the table between Ron and Harry. "Now *drink it*. Both of you. I'm going to speak to Professor McGonagall about Friday's test and then I'm meeting Sara for lunch. I expect the two of you to be feeling better by the time I return. And make sure you *eat* something."

"Yes Mum." Ron said as she crossed the room and went out. Harry just looked at Ron and smiled.

* * *

"Fawks!" Harry said, surprised.

The phoenix dropped a letter in Harry's lap, circled once, and came to rest on the back of a chair.

"It's from Dumbledore." Harry told Ron, who watched, interested. He opened the letter and read it aloud.

Dear Harry,

There is something I would like to discuss with you. Please come to my office as soon as possible.

Fawks will wait to carry your answer.

Sincerely,

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Professor Dumbledore

"Uh-oh." Harry sighed.

"You don't think he found out, do you?" Ron asked, concerned.

"Why else would he send me this?" Harry indicated the letter. "I'd better send Fawks back." He went to the desk and composed a note.

Professor Dumbledore,

I will come at once, Sir.

Harry Potter

Harry folded and sealed the letter and gave it Fawks, who flew off in a rush of red and gold feathers.

"Better to get it over with." He told Ron.

"But what are you going to *say*?"

"I don't know. The truth, I guess."

"Good luck, mate."

"Thanks." Harry said and left the tower, shoulders slumped.

* * *

What was he going to say? Did Dumbledore know they'd been drinking? Did he know he spent most of his nights in Sara's room? *What a disaster*. What could he say that would keep him out of trouble and was also the truth? Of course, the hooded figure. He could say he'd been protecting Sara from it and that's why he stayed there after hours. That was a large part of why he stayed with her, really. It wasn't hard for Harry to see how scared she was of it, but would Dumbledore, her *Uncle*, understand? Harry had reached the door. He hesitated; feeling suddenly scared, then turned to the gargoyle and spoke the password.

"Ice Mice."

The door opened and Harry entered. He knocked at the top of the stairs and the Headmaster bid him come in. There was Fawks, the enormous phoenix, on his perch as always. The Headmaster sat at his desk, his manner appearing pleasant to Harry, who was hung-over and nervous.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

Dumbledore indicated the chair across from him and spoke in his usual soft tone. "Yes, Harry. Have a seat."

Harry sat.

"It has come to my attention that you have been inattentive in class and distracted in general for the past five or six weeks. In fact, I hear you've been taking regular *naps* during lectures. Tell me, Harry, are you ill?"

"No sir."

"Is there something bothering you? Problems of any sort?"

Harry knew there was no lying to Dumbledore and besides, he seemed genuinely concerned. "No sir, no problems."

"Ah, you're in love, then." Dumbledore smiled.

Harry looked at the floor, unable to answer.

"You know, I've noticed similar changes in my niece recently. She's almost cheerful. Not so...*downhearted*. And I notice she smells of *wine* less often lately."

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Harry looked at him, knowing his face showed his guilt, but powerless to hide it. Dumbledore was clearly waiting for Harry to speak, but he was simply unable to. He just sat there, trying not to fidget.

"Have you met Sara?"

Harry's voice was barely above a whisper and he spoke at the floor. "Yes sir."

Dumbledore leaned across the desk and raised Harry's chin. "*It's alright*, Harry."

Harry visibly relaxed.

"Harry Potter," Dumbledore smiled, "if there is one boy in this school I find good enough for my niece, it's *you*."

"*Thank you!*" Harry beamed.

"However," (Harry's shoulders slumped) "I do have some concerns. Obviously this is affecting your schoolwork and I, as your Headmaster, cannot allow that to happen. You *must not* go to your classes so tired and so *distracted* you are unable to learn. You might miss something that could one day save your life. Remember that."

"I will, sir. I'm sorry."

"Also, there is the matter of Sara."

"What about Sara?" Harry wondered.

"You must know she has been *deeply* troubled since the loss of her parents, which I think you understand." Harry gave a brief nod, "It pains me to isolate her the way she is. It's entirely necessary, of course, but such isolation causes immense loneliness. Do you know what I mean, Harry?"

"I think so, Professor. Sara is very sad."

"That she is. And it worries me to think what will happen when the boy she loves goes home for the summer in just a few weeks. You might return to find half of Hogwarts underwater."

"So it's true then! It rains when Sara cries!"

"That it does." Dumbledore said and folded his hands. "Sara has a tremendous gift. Unfortunately she's also capable of mass destruction, Harry, and that is why she's hidden in that tower. Dark forces seek her for the powers she tries so hard to hide."

"Professor, how could *Sara* be capable of mass destruction? I don't understand."

"Ah, but I believe you do. You see, my niece went to Professor Snape with some concerns over our young Mr. Malfoy. When Severus came to me, asking permission to perform a memory charm on him I asked that he be brought to me first. He was given a mild truth serum, and he told me a rather amazing story."

"He assaulted her, sir! I swear Sara didn't do anything wrong."

"I *know* what happened, Harry. I know what Malfoy tried to do. And I'm sure you saw how she handled it."

"There was a, sort of an *earthquake* or something. And the black streak in her hair turned *bright red!* And she hit him with some kind of spell I'd never seen before. It looked like electricity."

"She hit him with lightning, Harry."

"*Lightning?!*"

"That is correct. You see, Sara's more extreme emotions are somehow linked with the elements. When she cries, it rains. When anger wells up inside her, the earth trembles. Her fury brings the wrath of the skies. She needs only to raise her arms to the heavens and she commands the winds." Dumbledore rose from the desk and began to pace the room.

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"There have been few Elementals throughout history. When I was but a young man I knew of one, a Romanian Gypsy named Vanya Ivanova who had the gift. You see, Harry, the Elemental lives for 120 years give or take, but one is born every century. That's the way it has *always* been, the 20 overlapping years allow time for an apprenticeship. Regrettably, Sara and Vanya have never met, but Sara is undoubtedly stronger than *most* Elementals, but a fledgling in the use of her ability and it is because of these two things that she is sought by Voldemort. It's why her parents were killed. It was Sara they were after."

"Then how did she escape?" Harry wondered, he had lots of questions about Sara's parents, none of which ever seemed appropriate.

"She had the good fortune to not be home at the time. She had gone out with a friend for the evening and decided at a late hour to stay the night at the girl's house. If she hadn't, I hate to think what might have happened."

"She probably thinks it's her fault." Harry realized.

"I'm sure she does. Even though we've tried to convince her otherwise. We've all done our best to

console Sara, but nothing has helped. Until she met *you*, that is."

Harry smiled. "I know how she feels, Professor."

"I know you do. And that is the reason why I will allow you to visit Sara in her tower. Not excessively, mind you. You've got your classes to think about. And I'll ask you to keep this permission between us. You must not be caught."

"I won't, sir."

"But I *must* ask you not to get too close to her. Remember, you'll be leaving soon. We don't want that black tress to consume her whole head."

"What is it, that streak? It grows sometimes and others it's barely noticeable. I asked her once, but she only said it had appeared one day."

"Yes, the day she came home to find the American Department of Magic waiting for her. Only it wasn't just a streak at that point. It was a *shroud*. Every strand turned black and it grew to her feet within hours. It was like nothing I've ever seen" He admitted, "The shroud is supposed to be myth." Dumbledore took his seat again and looked directly at Harry. "The black in her hair is caused by the most *profound* sort of sadness. The kind that penetrates the very soul. And the red you saw was a rage so strong it overcame all other emotions. Sara must be protected from such extremes. She must not be pushed. But don't let me frighten you, my dear boy. Sara can control her powers. In fact, she hasn't done more than play with the wind since she was a young girl."

"But why? Why wouldn't she use it?"

"It's a terrible story, Harry, and I know you will not judge her by it."

"Of course not."

"When Sara was twelve years old she was rather spoiled, being an only child, and used to getting her way. On holiday with her parents in California, they refused her something and Sara became angry. When her mother, Diana, tried to punish her for her behavior, Sara flew into a rage and caused an Earthquake that leveled whole neighborhoods and killed dozens of people." he paused, "After seeing what she had done, she cursed her powers, vowed never to use them again. Of course she was only a child, but she simply *cannot* forgive herself.

It's how Voldemort learned of her. There were several witnesses. It was reported in the muggle newspapers that a young girl's hair turned from blonde to red in the midst of a tantrum at the instant the Earthquake began. It took him four years to find them in New York."

"I see." Harry said, feeling terrible for Sara, knowing she's been living with such tremendous guilt. No wonder her hair turned black, he thought. "And I understand your concern, Professor. I'll do my best." SpookyMulder The Girl in the Tower page 21

"I'm sure you will, Harry. I'm sure you will. I trust you in those matters, but there's always one more thing that concerns me. Harry, you are both too young."

Harry became suddenly alarmed and interrupted Dumbledore, something he would never dream of doing under normal circumstances. "We haven't, um, I mean we've *never*."

Dumbledore held up his hand. "None of my business."

Harry relaxed. "Then what is it, sir?"

"Harry, you're both too young to be left unsupervised late at night. I go against my better judgment because I believe you to be an honorable young man. You *must* be responsible, Harry. That is all I have to say on the subject."

"I won't let you down, sir."

Dumbledore only smiled knowingly at Harry, who tried to smile back and ended up looking at the floor again.

"Judging by the way you smell, I would say the four of you had an extraordinary time last night."

Harry looked up immediately. *Uh-oh*. He thought.

"It had come to my attention that Sara had ordered dinner for four to be brought to her rooms last evening. A dinner party! The very thing she needs. Friends, laughter, companionship. Your friends Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger are students I hold in high regard and I approve *completely*. Only be careful with spirits, Harry. They cloud your judgment and lead to foolish behavior. There are few things worse than regret."

Harry nodded his understanding.

"Unless you have something to add I've nothing more to say."

"Just one thing, sir." Harry said, "The last Quidditch game of the season is coming up. We're playing Slytherin for the Cup. I'd like if Sara could go." He lowered his voice, "She could use my invisibility cloak."

"That, Harry, could be arranged, I think."

"Thank you, Professor."

"I think you know the way out."

Harry stood. "Good day, sir."

"Good day, Harry. Remember what I've said."

Harry smiled and went out, stopping in the passage to fall against the wall and breathe relief. He didn't think things could be any better for him and Sara and couldn't wait to see her so he could tell her everything, but he didn't want to interrupt her lunch with Hermione. He wanted them to become friends in the worst way. He would tell her tonight, but in the meantime, he had to tell Ron! Harry hurried off for Gryffindor House, walking as fast as he could without actually running.

* * *

Hermione didn't return to Gryffindor until just before dinner. She was exuberant and dressed in

expensive clothes. Her hair was soft and lustrous, her nails long and shiny with a light polish. "I didn't know she could look like that." Harry admitted as they watched her approach. Hermione simply glowed.

"She looks *fabulous*." Ron whispered, watching her.

"Then *tell* her!" Harry urged. He smiled as Hermione stopped in front of them, obviously waiting to hear what they had to say. Harry nudged Ron, who looked terrified and dumbstruck.

"Hermione," Ron finally said, "you look, well, kind of beautiful."

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Harry rolled his eyes. He waited for Hermione to be offended, but she smiled sweetly instead. The two of them stood staring at each other and Harry felt like a third wheel. Without a word, he went up to his room, where he lay on his bed, thinking of Sara and his conversation with Dumbledore.

He wondered how he was going to leave for the summer without causing her any more distress.

Already the thought of being so far apart brought *him* great anguish and he dreaded the last day of classes. How would it affect Sara, who was already so troubled?

Harry fell onto his pillow, feeling helpless. He counted the minutes until he could see her every day. Could he really not see as much of her? It didn't seem possible and besides, he thought, it wouldn't help. Their palms had already told their story.

Harry sighed, miserable. What could he do? There were no answers. He would just have to talk to her about it, prepare her emotionally. But now it was time for dinner and Harry got out of bed.

He found Ron and Hermione sitting together on a sofa near the fire. By the looks of it, Harry thought, they hadn't broken eye contact since he'd left them. Ron's arm was draped across the cushions behind her. *Why doesn't he just do it?* Harry thought. He knew Ron was terrified, but didn't really understand why. Harry thought it obvious that Hermione liked him. Ron was the only one who didn't seem to notice. And they didn't notice him as he crossed the room. Harry smiled as he passed behind their sofa and pushed Ron's arm off the cushion and onto Hermione's shoulders. Ron instantly turned bright red and apologized profusely. Hermione only smiled, demure.

"Are you two going to sit there all night?" Harry grinned, "It's time for dinner, you know."

"We were just about to go down." Hermione said, a little flushed, "We were waiting for you."

"Yeah Harry, you bloody creep." Ron added with embarrassment on his face.

"Let's go, then." Harry said and led them out.

* * *

"I've got to go." Harry said as he looked across the table at Ron and Hermione, "I've got to talk to Sara." he got out of his seat.

"Tell her I said thank you for dinner." Ron said.

"I will. I'll see you in the morning." Harry left the table and headed for the stairs, but Professor Dumbledore beckoned to him. The Headmaster left the teacher's table and Harry noticed most of the students still eating were staring at him. Dumbledore put his arm around Harry's shoulders, turning him so their backs were to the multitude of prying eyes.

"Harry, I've been to see Sara." Dumbledore said, sounding concerned, "We had a little talk, similar to the one I had with you, but I fear I have upset her. It started to rain shortly after I left."

Harry glanced up at the dining room ceiling, which he hadn't thought to do during dinner, and saw nothing but black thunderheads and dim flashes of lightning. He turned to Dumbledore, fighting the feeling to bolt up the stairs. "I'm on my way to see her now, sir."

"Good. She could use some company. I gave her a picture of her mother that I've had for a few years. I was hoping it would lift her spirits, but now I think we may have that flood *before* you leave."

"I understand." Harry said, "I'll go right away, Professor."

"Thank you, Harry." Dumbledore said and smiled. He returned to his seat as Harry took to the stairs and began talking quietly to Professor McGonagall on his right.

As soon as Harry was out of sight he stepped up his pace. He could see the rain outside, coming down in buckets, and he heard the rumble of thunder overhead. It was a furious storm, one of the worst they'd had. He took the tower steps two at a time and was nearly out of breath when he finally reached the top. Her door opened for him and Harry hurried into the sitting room. Kicking off his shoes, he went into the bedroom, heading for the roof.

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He heard muffled crying halfway across and turned to find her curled up on her bed, the picture Dumbledore mentioned laying next to her. Sara clutched a tissue in her hand and didn't seem to know Harry was there. The black streak in her hair was wider than Harry had ever seen it and it unnerved him. He went to her and sat down on the edge. "Sara." He whispered and gently touched her arm.

"Harry," she said and flew into his arms, "Harry, he won't let me leave."

"I know," he said and held her, stroking her hair as her head found his shoulder. "It will be alright, Sara. It's not for long, really. We'll be back before you know it. I'll write to you *everyday*," he kissed her again, "It won't be so bad. You'll see."

"It already feels like forever," she said through her tears.

Harry held her so close he feared she might suffocate. "I'll think about you every moment." He said and the rain seemed to slow a little. "But we'll get through this. I know we will."

He relaxed his arms and she slumped against him. "There's nothing we can do," she said, her voice choked by the tears that still fell. "Hermione invited me to stay at her house. She thought the four of us could spend a day together, but Uncle Albus said it wasn't possible. It would have gotten me through, Harry, but to not see *anyone at all...*" She cried harder and the rain worsened. Harry stroked her hair

and kissed her forehead. She calmed a little, her voice still trembled. "I'll be alone here for *months*. I was at my wit's end when I found you and then Hermione and Ron, having sat in silence for half a year in my tower like some messed up storybook princess, drunk and lonely. I had such a good time last night, I felt almost *normal* again. I can't go back to that. I *have* to get out of here, Harry. I'm a prisoner, and I'm dieing inside."

"*I won't let you.*" He said and lifted her chin to look at him. He kissed her and smiled and the rain slowed a little more. "We have to think positively. After this summer we never have to be apart again." She sighed, "I hope you're right."

"Believe me, I don't want to leave you, but I have to. I have no choice. I would sneak you out of here with my cloak in a second if I didn't think you were safest right where you are. No one here will let anything happen to you, Sara. You're in good hands."

"I know where I'm safest, Harry, and it's wherever you are." Sara sat up and touched the tissue to her eyes, "That thing is afraid of you, you know. It's not afraid of the *teachers* sleeping down below. That's why it hasn't been back, because you're always here. It will come back, though, and it *will* come in eventually. I'm scared of it. More than I've ever been of anything."

"You *have* to tell Dumbledore. It's the only way!"

"Harry, he'll *never* let me out of here if I tell him!"

"What other choice is there? Sara, be reasonable! How can he protect you if he doesn't know *everything*? And you won't even close the doors!"

"Harry, I'm half Gypsy. I can't sleep without wind and fresh air. *It's in my blood.*"

"Then tell him." Harry said, "Tell him or I will."

They looked at each other for a long moment, her eyes red and defeated, his resolute.

"Fine." she said, "I'll tell him, but not until the last day of school."

"Good enough." Harry said and fell back on the bed. He lifted his head and took the old muggle photograph off the pillow. "Your mother, I assume."

"Yes. Uncle Albus had it. He knows how much I miss her." A few fresh tears fell and a light rain spattered the roof outside.

"You look a lot alike."

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"I always wanted to *be* like her, but I never quite was." Sara looked at the silent stereo across the room and it came to life, playing soft and low. It was the blues again, the same song in fact, that Harry first remembered hearing the night they'd met. He'd heard this woman's music many times and it was always soul stirring.

"It's your mother, isn't it?"

"Yes. I've always loved to hear her sing."

"I loved it the first time I heard it. Just like when I caught you singing that day. Out on the roof? You have the loveliest voice, kind of angelic I always thought. I think Snape was right. Your mother *would* be proud."

"Snape knew my mother, you know. They went to school together. They were friends before he fell in with the Death Eaters. We had a long journey from New York together and he told me my mother was the only girl in school who was kind to him. I think it explains why he's so nice to me. I understand he's not the most popular teacher at Hogwarts."

"No, I would say he's defiantly not. *All* the Gryffindors despise him. *Especially me.*"

Sara smiled at last. "He sneers when he says your name. Just like Malfoy does. I think he hates you, Harry."

"I think you're right. Now go change your clothes and sit by the fire with me."

Sara squeezed his hand. "Thank you." She whispered.

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3. Playing Dirty

The door was yet to be raised and Harry stood aside his broom. "Okay team." he called out, "We're playing *their* game today. We're going to win, of course, but let's be *brutal*." They waited to lift off, waited for their cue and the roar of the crowd. "Fred, George?" Harry smiled back at them, "This is your last game. Play the way you've always wanted to."

"Aye aye, Captain." Fred said and both brothers raised their hands in sharp salute. Harry laughed.

They did this all the time, even when they weren't playing Quidditch.

"Yeah," Ron said, "Let's give those rotten Slytherins exactly what they deserve!"

Finally, they heard Lee Jordan, the announcer.

"Welcome to the last Quidditch game of the season. Gryffindor versus Slytherin!" The crowd cheered louder, "Today's game is for the Quidditch Cup! Now let's hear it for the Slytherin team!" Some clapping and a resounding *boooo!* filled the stands. The Slytherins, lead by Malfoy, did a quick lap and touched down to meet Madam Hooch.

The door was raised and Harry's team mounted their brooms.

"And *now* let's hear it for the defending champions, *Gryffindor!*" Harry, followed closely by Ron, led his team into the thunderous roar of the crowd. Most of the spectators wore the Gryffindor colors, he noticed, and many held signs bearing blinking words of encouragement and painted lions. As they did their laps around the playing field, Harry looked for Professor Dumbledore in the top boxes, knowing the empty space next to him would be Sara. He finally spotted him and flew up close, hovering for a moment to smile at the invisible girl and gave Hagrid a brief wave, then leaned forward on his Firebolt to take position above the other players. He looked across at Malfoy, who was the

Slytherin Seeker and Captain, (an honor he hadn't exactly earned) and gave him his most intimidating sneer. Malfoy sneered back.

"Captains Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy are in position. The teams are ready. Madam Hooch releases the bludgers and the golden snitch."

The snitch zipped around Harry, then Malfoy, and was out of sight. Harry leveled his eyes on Malfoy again and this time he smiled and winked. Malfoy looked a bit disarmed.

"And there's the quaffle! The game begins!"

A bludger flew past Harry's head and he ducked it just in time. He remained above the field of play, but Malfoy moved in closer, never content to just hover and watch. Slytherin had the quaffle, and one of their chasers was looking to score.

"And a terrific save by Ron Weasley!" The crowd erupted and Ron raised a fist in the air. "The quaffle is passed to Regina Thomas, who dodges a bludger, she's about to pass to- no, she scores! Ten points to Gryffindor! Great fake Regina!"

The snitch buzzed past Harry and he exploded after it. Fred Weasley saw he was on its trail and fell in to give Harry some cover. Finally Malfoy saw Harry in motion and quickly caught up, flying side by side. He rammed Harry, who barely moved, and Harry slammed into Malfoy on a turn, sending him straight into the stands where he crashed into his own spectators.

"Gryffindor Captain Harry Potter has taken out *Slytherin* Captain Draco Malfoy! No, wait, he's up!

Malfoy is *not* out of the game!"

Fred yelled from behind, "Hard to see the snitch with blood in your eye!"

"Another ten points to Gryffindor! That's Gryffindor twenty and Slytherin zero!"

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Harry saw it was time to put his ultimate plan for Malfoy into effect, and it was sure to work if he was having trouble seeing. Harry let Malfoy catch up and they ran side by side for half a lap, then Harry went into a perilous vertical dive, nearing top speed. Malfoy followed him, speeding up to catch Harry, thinking he was on the trail of the snitch. Harry came so close to the ground that he actually got nervous, but pulled up at the very last opportunity. Malfoy, however, was so eager to prove himself the better seeker, he passed Harry, flying as fast as his broom could carry him, and wasn't able to pull out of the dive. He crashed hard into the ground, screaming and shattering his Firebolt in the process.

"*The Wronski Feint!*" Lee was shouting, "I can't believe it! Harry Potter *annihilates* Draco Malfoy with the *Wronski Feint!* Harry Potter *RULES!*" The crowd came to its feet, chanting his name.

Harry, his heart beating like crazy, but a smile on his face, caught up to Fred Weasley, who was keeping track of the snitch while he disposed of Malfoy. Fred immediately fell back and within moments a Slytherin 6th year was alongside Harry, trying to ram him into the stands.

George Weasley appeared off to the right, fast on the trail of a bludger. Harry caught his eye and gave him a brief nod. To the Slytherin Chaser's surprise, Harry suddenly went high and George swung at the bludger, sending it straight at the opposition. The Slytherin saw it coming, but there wasn't even time to duck. He fell off his broom and hit the ground with a thud. The Gryffindor crowd cheered their loudest yet, while the Slytherin crowd booed and yelled. Yes, it was dirty, Harry thought as he chased the snitch, but nothing Slytherin hadn't done to them.

"Slytherin Chaser Doug Gorrieth is hit by a bludger and is out of the game! We haven't seen such aggressive play from the Gryffindor team since last year's Quidditch Cup!"

Harry knew he had to catch the snitch very soon. Slytherin wouldn't take their losses lightly and he feared they were already on his trail. He waited every second to be hit by a bludger. The snitch dropped, as it always seemed to do just as he thought he had it, and Harry went into another vertical dive, following it until it was straighten out or crash. He gripped the broom with his heels and pulled up with his hands, leveling out as the crowd gasped.

"Ten points to Slytherin!"

"Come on, Ron!" Harry said aloud, though no one heard. He came up on the snitch as it rose a little and he stretched for it, still out of reach. He leaned forward as far as he could, trying to push the Firebolt as fast as it would go and he saw the gap between his fingers and the snitch closing. Then he heard Fred's voice.

"Watch out, Harry!"

Harry dipped without thought and felt the bludger skim his shoulder. He glanced up and saw one of the Slytherin Beaters grinning at him and he forgot all about the snitch.

There was something he simply *had* to do. Harry grinned and sat up as he rode past, his middle finger raised and held out to the Slytherin creep who'd just tried to take his head off. The menacing boy's face went into a scowl and Harry laughed out loud before turning his attention back to the snitch. The Gryffindor crowd boomed with laughter. Even some of the teachers had to hide their smiles.

"*He flipped him off!*" Lee shouted, "Harry Potter just-"

"LEE JORDAN!" came the voice of Professor McGonagall, (who sounded rather amused to Harry), followed by a muffled "sorry."

He heard the whiz of the bludger again, then the soft thud of a body hitting the grass a moment later.

"Slytherin loses a beater!" Lee announced, "George Weasley sure is dangerous today! Slytherin is down to four players and there's little hope for a comeback!" Harry was always glad Lee was from Gryffindor House. The biased announcing helped his team's morale, although today Harry felt *invincible*.

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"Ten points to Gryffindor! Regina Thomas fools the Slytherin Keeper with the same fake again! And

Gryffindor *Seeker* Harry Potter closes on the snitch, having just been missed by a bludger! And look at that *in-your-face* save by Ron Weasley! Incredible! Slytherin is really taking a beating! But, wait, *wait!* He has it! Harry Potter catches the snitch for one hundred and fifty points! Gryffindor wins the Quidditch Cup!"

The crowd came to its feet and the noise was deafening. Harry held the snitch high and rose to circle the field, his teammates behind him, their arms raised in victory. Harry hovered in front of Dumbledore's box, where Hermione now stood with the space that was Sara. He gave the snitch a wave, smiling triumphant, and led his team to the ground. Madam Hooch ran over and handed Liam Seever the Quidditch Cup. Together, the Gryffindor Team lifted it in the air while the crowd chanted "*Grif-fin-dor! Grif-fin-dor!*"

Harry looked to Sara, and since everyone was busy looking at the winning team, she pulled back the hood of the cloak and blew him a kiss. He smiled until she raised the hood again and was gone.

* * *

"Congratulations Harry, *congratulations!*" Professor McGonagall beamed as she hurried toward him. He was just emerging from the team's locker-room celebration, still wearing his Quidditch robe and pads, looking to find Sara as soon as possible. "Professor Dumbledore would like to speak to you. Come quickly." She took his hand and all but dragged him along, moving briskly in all her excitement.

"Is it about Malfoy?"

"No, no. Mr. Malfoy is recovering in the hospital wing, Harry, he'll be just fine. It's only a few broken bones."

As head of Gryffindor house, Harry fully expected McGonagall to be displeased with the way they'd played, but she showed no sign of it. She smiled all the way to Dumbledore's office. Before speaking the password, she turned to Harry, still smiling. "*Well played*, Harry, it's about time those Slytherins got a taste of their own medicine. I thought it was brilliant! Even that vulgar hand gesture."

Harry grinned.

"There will be a party waiting in the common room when you're finished, so hurry back." She looked positively tickled!

"Thank you, Professor."

"*Ice mice.*" She said and led him through the door, up the steps, and into Dumbledore's office. "Here he is, Albus!"

"Thank you, Minerva."

Professor McGonagall left the room and Dumbledore got out of his seat. He offered Harry his hand and Harry shook it, both of them smiling wide. Harry marveled at the truth and wisdom he saw in Dumbledore's eyes. He was much taller than Dumbledore now, but he always felt so hopelessly inferior.

"Good job *again*, Captain. Remarkable!"

"Thank you, sir! We have a great team."

"That you do. And your friend Ron has proven to be a talented edition! Much improved over last year." Dumbledore grinned a little, remembering Ron's total lack of confidence, "He made a most incredible save while you were chasing the snitch. He did some spinning maneuver, hit the quaffle with the front end of his broom and passed it back to the chasers! And *then* he stuck out his tongue!" Dumbledore laughed, "Harry, your team was *most spirited* today. Great fun to watch."

"We knew we could beat them, sir." Harry smiled, "We just wanted to have some fun with the Slytherins. You know, *give back* a little."

"Well you certainly did *that!*" Dumbledore laughed, "And a bit of showing off too, I think."

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"Perhaps a little."

"*Perhaps*, you had someone to impress."

"Thank you for bringing her, Professor. It was great having her there. Besides, how could I lose the Quidditch Cup in front of Sara?"

"How indeed! You haven't lost a game yet! Well, not counting the one the Dementors attended, quite unannounced." Dumbledore looked angry for a moment, and then his smile returned. "There is something I wanted you to have, Harry, and I think this is the moment for it." He went to his desk and picked up a heavy gold frame, covered in glass. This he handed to Harry.

"Wow." Harry said, looking at the very plaque Hermione had pointed out to him the day he'd made the Quidditch team. Originally given to a champion Gryffindor team of long ago, the largest of the seven gold inscriptions read 'Seeker; James Potter'.

"I don't know how to thank you, Professor."

"You *already have.*" Dumbledore smiled. "If I'd had a son, Harry Potter, I would want him to be just like you. *That,*" he said, "is all the thanks I need."

Harry smiled, touched by the words of the man he most respected. "I'll cherish this, sir. And if I ever have a house of my own, I'll hang it right over the mantle."

"And that would be its proper place. But until then, I think you have a party to attend."

"As soon as I see Sara."

"Yes, of course. She's expecting you, I believe."

Harry turned to leave.

"Harry, I wanted to thank you for what you've done for her. She's looking at things a little differently."

"I did my best, sir."

"You *always do*, Harry."

Harry smiled one last time before passing through the door. He stopped for a moment in the hall to look at the plaque again. This had to be the best day of his life, he thought. The *very* best day.

* * *

Sara was in her bedroom when Harry arrived and those all-too-familiar butterflies flared up in his stomach the moment he saw her. He thought she looked fantastic, dressed in yet another variation of her favorite style, with a much shorter skirt, bare feet and all, but today there was something *different* about her. Something that *radiated*.

"You were *incredible*," she smiled seductively at him and the butterflies turned to something warmer. "You must be the most *exciting* person I've ever met, *Captain* Harry Potter." She took a few deliberate steps toward him. "I felt rather exhilarated watching you dispose of that horrible Malfoy. And the way you *played* that Slytherin kid who thought he could take you out." She stood before him now and the warm feeling was spreading. "You're so brave, Harry, so *unshakable*. And I must say, that uniform is rather sexy." She removed his pads, throwing them on the floor. "I don't know just exactly how long I can keep my hands off you, *Captain*."

Harry pulled off his Quidditch robe and dropped it, finding it suddenly hot, and hard to breathe. He stood looking at Sara, the warmth in his stomach having enveloped his entire being. His heart started to race. He could feel her breath on his neck, sending tingles down his spine and when she whispered so sweetly he could hear the desire in her voice. "Put your hands on me, Harry."

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He kissed her deeper and with more passion than he *ever* had and they fell to the bed without grace. His hands were everywhere and she responded breathlessly, pulling at his Quidditch jumper and slipping her hands beneath it. Her touch was *electric*, Harry thought, like low-voltage pressed against his skin. His hands slipped under her clothes and her kiss became a fever, her fingers tangling in his hair...

"Sara," he whispered. "We have to stop."

"*Don't*," she sighed. "I don't care anymore."

"But we promised Dumbledore." He rolled onto his back, catching his breath. "Believe me; I've never wanted to be so *irresponsible* in my entire life."

"I know, but it's becoming so difficult," she settled her head on his shoulder and threw a loose arm over his chest. He pulled her close and kissed her forehead. "What are we going to do? We can't keep this up forever."

"We have to find a way, that's all. We didn't promise we *wouldn't*. Just that we'd be *responsible*."

"That would be easy, if only I could get out of this castle for *one day*. My friend Noelle from Brooklyn got something from her doctor and she said they can't tell *anybody*. Not even your parents."

"You mean there are no doctors for wine-guzzling storybook princesses?"

"Not for the tower dwellers," Sara laughed. "Unfortunately."

"Then maybe you should talk to Dumbledore. I think he might be understanding."

"What if he isn't and decides we're spending too much time together?"

"Good point," Harry agreed. "So what do we do?"

"Leave it to me. I'll think of *something*."

"I hope so." He sighed. "If not, perhaps Hermione can help. There must be a potion or a spell or something." Harry rolled onto his side to face her, brushing the hair back from her face as he smiled.

"I love you, Sara. I want you to know that."

"I know, Harry. I love you, too. How could I not?" She showed him her most affectionate smile. "I'll miss you like crazy, but I won't let it make me miserable, I promise. I'll *sing* whenever I think of you. It's what I do when I miss my mother."

"As long as you're not drowning yourself with Riesling. It troubles me, Sara. I hate it when you're like that."

"So do I, Harry."

He kissed her sweetly, the intensity of earlier lingering, but quieted. Harry held her close, dreading the moment when he would leave her, less than two days away. He knew she lied about her sadness, *and* about the wine, but she meant it at the moment so he said nothing more. It would do no good.

They lay together for awhile, quiet, dreaming secretly of September until Harry remembered the celebration at Gryffindor tower. He sat up swiftly, sending Sara to the bed with a thump. "Sorry!" he said. "I've got to get to the party! I forgot all about it and they're probably wondering where I am. How long have I been here?" He asked as he jumped from the bed and hurried to slip on his shoes and grab up his Quidditch gear.

"I don't know," she smiled pleasantly, head propped on her elbow as she watched him from the bed. "Maybe an hour."

"An hour! I was supposed to come *right back*! McGonagall's going to turn me into a toad for sure."

"I'll turn you back into a prince, then."

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He stopped to kiss her before running for the door. "I'll be back as soon as I can," he said and was gone.

* * *

"For *heaven's sake*, boy, you've got lipstick all over your collar." McGonagall shook her head as she pulled him into the room. "And your shoes are untied. You look a shambles!" Harry thought she must have been hovering near the door, waiting for him. A group of third year girls giggled as he walked by. "Nice hair," one of them smirked. Harry felt the tangled mess on his head and remembered Sara's

hands had lingered there. He felt suddenly self-conscious and wanted to slip away to his room to straighten up. He smoothed his hair as best he could, noticing his shirt was half untucked, pulled askew, and sticking out from under his jumper.

"Attention!" McGonagall yelled to the crowded common room, "Our Captain is *finally* here!"

Every member of Gryffindor house must have been present and they were applauding him, cheering and passing him bottles of butter beer. He shifted his Quidditch gear and the gold frame to his left arm to accept one. Many hands were patting him on the back and congratulations were heard on all sides. He was instantly surrounded. He smiled and tried to shy away, his eyes on the stairs that led to the dorms, inching his way toward them.

Ron and Hermione appeared before him, knowing better than to ask where he'd been, and he was thankful for the opportunity to slip into conversation, allowing everyone else to go back to what they were doing.

"Nice lipstick." Ron grinned.

"Leave him alone, Ron." Hermione smiled, "It's none of our business, you know."

"Nothing happened." Harry said, his voice as quiet as the noisy room would allow.

"What happened to your *hair*?" Ron grinned again, "It's sticking out all crazy like."

"Just help me get to our room."

"We'll be right back." Ron told Hermione, resting a hand on her shoulder until they turned to go. The smile and the look she gave Ron told Harry all he needed to know.

As they climbed the stairs, having stopped to thank every person who congratulated them on the way, Harry had to ask. "So you finally told her?"

"It was Sara." Ron explained, "She sent me an owl. She told me to get over my fear of rejection before Hermione got tired of waiting"

"So? What happened?"

"Well, after the match today I felt like I could do no wrong." Ron smiled, "So I just walked up and kissed her. She didn't hit me or anything!"

"It's about time. I was getting tired of watching you two stare at each other."

"Can you believe our luck, Harry?" Ron asked, "Here we are, Quidditch champions at a celebration in *our* honor, and we both have *really* good looking girlfriends. Who'd have thought."

Harry just smiled and dumped his stuff on his bed. He put the framed plaque, carefully wrapped in an old jumper, into his trunk (noticing his invisibility cloak had been mysteriously returned) and found some fresh clothes. He ran a comb through his hair, embarrassed and amused by his disheveled appearance.

"How is Sara, Harry? You're leaving in two days."

"She's upset, of course. Dumbledore won't let her out. She wants to stay with Hermione but he said it's too risky." Harry sighed, "I'm really going to miss her."

"Maybe he'll change his mind." Ron tried to smile.

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"Yeah." Harry said. "Come on. We'd better get back now."

* * *

The party went on until one in the morning. Harry had such a good time, he kept deciding to stay just a few more minutes until he was one of the last few students left in the common room. Fred and George were in such a crazy mood that it seemed a shame to leave, especially since they would never be back and Harry would never have this chance again.

Finally, Ron said goodnight to Hermione privately and returned to the small gathering with a smile on his tired face.

"I'm turning in," he announced, "can't keep my eyes open another minute." he yawned, setting off a chain reaction and suddenly *everyone* was going to bed. Harry followed Ron to their room, where the other three boys were already long asleep, and got his invisibility cloak out of his trunk. He sat down on the bed to talk to Ron a minute before going to meet Sara, who probably expected him hours ago, the cloak draped across his lap.

"Tell me what's going on with you and Hermione." Harry yawned and fell back on the pillow. "Are you together or just thinking about it?" He yawned again.

"We're a couple I guess. We're making plans to spend some time together over the summer. "

Ron stopped talking. Harry was snoring softly, fast asleep. Ron smiled at his friend, then went to the desk and pulled out a quill.

Dear Sara,

Harry fell asleep. I think he was about to go to your tower. He's still wearing his shoes. I thought you would want to know.

Your friend,

Ron

He gave the letter to Hedwig, who seemed glad to have something to do. She flew off straight away, knowing just where to go and Ron fell onto his bed without changing into pajamas. He was asleep within minutes.

* * *

Harry awoke at the first light of dawn, as he always did, and had no idea where he was, or why he was still wearing his glasses. It took a moment to realize he was in his own room, not Sara's, but he could feel her there, could smell her perfume. In fact, she was lying on his arm.

"Sara!" He whispered, pulling back the invisibility cloak, which she had wrapped herself with, the

Marauder's Map still clutched in her hand. "Sara, wake up!"

"Morning, Harry." she whispered sleepily, "I missed you last night."

"You're crazy, coming in here." he smiled, "But I'm glad you did." he pulled the blankets up to their necks and she snuggled against him.

"I took off your shoes." she whispered, "and pulled the curtains."

"I'm so sorry, Sara. I was just about to go see you and I was talking to Ron. I must have fallen asleep."

"You did. You must have been *exhausted*, especially after such a busy day. *So what* if I had to come to you for once. It's nice to be someplace other than the tower, anyway. And it's so *dangerous*." she grinned.

"Not really. I doubt anyone's about yet. This is when I usually come in and I never even need my cloak."

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"I should get back now. Before I get you in trouble."

"Are you kidding? This is great!" he smiled, "There's a *girl* in my bed. I doubt anyone's tried *that* before."

"Hmm. A story for the grandkids."

"Definitely."

"I'll stay a few minutes, Harry, but then I really should go."

"I wish you could stay forever, Sara."

"So do I, Captain."

* * *

Ron, Hermione, and Harry were rather subdued as they climbed the endless steps of the tower, having just left the end of year feast where they'd eaten nothing, still dressed in their school robes and black caps. It was their last night at Hogwarts. They were leaving in the morning and each felt terrible for Sara, knowing she would be alone when they'd gone.

"How long is Dumbledore planning to keep her here, Harry? Until Voldemort *dies*? I mean, it's kind of ridiculous, don't you think?" Ron asked about halfway up, "She's missing *everything*."

"I know." Harry sighed, "I tried talking to him about it, but he insists. There's nothing more I can do."

"Harry," Hermione said, "Dumbledore put spells on *your* house to keep Voldemort out. Why can't he protect Sara the same way? I mean, she can't even visit! It isn't fair."

"Nothing to do with Sara is fair." Ron told her. "She's going crazy, I'll bet."

"She is." Harry confirmed, "She feels like a prisoner. I just wish I could do something. I can't help thinking that Dumbledore's wrong about this."

"Yeah," Ron half smiled, "And who's going to tell him so?"

"Not me."

"Not me, either."

They had reached the door, which didn't open until Harry stepped in front of it. Soft, sleepy music drifted out and they could hear Sara singing along. Ron whispered "She sounds better than the recording." Harry and Hermione silently nodded their agreement.

Sara had tired eyes, yet she smiled and greeted them warmly. She hugged Hermione and kissed Ron's cheek. She was beyond cheerless when she looked to Harry and said nothing, just took his hand and led him to the table, set for their last dinner party. Sara's glass already held wine, although it was half gone, and the three of them shared a concerned glance. She seemed a little less than steady on her feet and the enthusiasm was gone from her smile. The streak in her hair was more profound than ever and the all-black outfit she wore seemed funeral-like.

Sara took a long drink of her glass and tears seemed about to leak from her eyes as thunder rumbled in the distance. The black in her hair grew as they watched and Hermione started to cry. She quickly wiped her eyes, but Ron and Harry saw and lowered their heads, feeling the same way.

Thankfully, house elves entered, carrying their dinner, which they placed on the table without a word. They were gone as quickly as they'd come and the four of them ate in silence. Sara hardly touched her food, holding her fork without purpose, pushing things from one side of her plate to the other, and often her gaze lingered on Harry. Hermione moved her chair next to Sara's and took her friend's hand. She refilled Sara's glass, then her own, and finally Sara smiled.

"I'm sorry." Sara said, "It's depressing, thinking about you all leaving."

"Then you know how *we* feel." Hermione smiled feebly, "We'll all miss you, Sara."

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Harry had still said nothing. He hadn't touched his wine. Most of his dinner was uneaten and he was visibly melancholy.

"Let's go in." Sara said and led them to a room even Harry hadn't seen before. The furniture was covered with dusty sheets and Sara swept them onto the floor to reveal beautiful parlor sofas of burgundy velvet, which she motioned for them to sit on. The moon had risen and shone through the windows, casting the loveliest of shadows. Sara looked to them with the sweetest smile, then went to the corner of the room and slowly took the sheet from a grand piano. "I thought I might sing for you." Harry, Ron, and Hermione looked to each other, astonished. Sara never sang in front of anyone, and whenever they caught her at it she stopped instantly and acted as if she hadn't been.

"Please." Harry said, giving her his best smile. "I'd love to hear you sing."

"We would be honored." Hermione said and Ron nodded his agreement. Harry noticed out of the corner of his eye that Ron and Hermione were holding hands.

Sara placed a brass candelabra in the center of the piano and held her fingers out to it. Flames leapt

from the wicks and she took her seat. She gestured again and a violin lifted into the air and prepared to play as if a musician held it, though it only hovered there, waiting for Sara to begin.

The first few notes were shaky. Sara was nervous. The song she played was pure sadness as the violin joined the piano and her voice was finally heard. She closed her eyes and her voice grew stronger, more sure, and she found her niche. The room and her friends went away as she poured her soul into her song, just as her mother had done, and Sara slipped back in time. She was a little girl, sitting in the shadowy corner of a New Orleans lounge, watching her mother perform in a cloud of smoke, her honey voice reaching out in the darkness to the hearts of all who heard. The music was smooth, deep and low, emotional. Sara's voice permeated everything.

She's speaking, Harry thought, *she's telling us how she feels*. She's using the music. The words told of heartbreak and a helpless loneliness that pulled at the soul until it could be felt and pushed out everything else. It was moving and painful, uninterrupted beauty. It was the saddest thing Harry had ever heard.

* * *

"I'll write all the time, Sara." Hermione said as she hugged her friend. "And I'll send you magazines and catalogs and books. If you need *anything* I can get it for you. Just let me know."

"That's so sweet of you, Herms." Sara smiled, pulling back to look at her, "And I'll keep at Uncle Albus, if the invitation's still open."

"You're always welcome. I really hope he lets you come."

Sara turned to Ron and hugged him, too. "I'll miss you, Ron." She said, "I hope you'll keep in touch."

"I will, Sara. And when we come back, I hope you'll play for us again."

"Certainly."

Ron kissed Sara's cheek and led Hermione out the door, both turning to look back one more time before leaving for good.

Thunder rumbled outside and Harry rushed to console her before the rain could start. He heard a light splattering, but then it stopped and the thunder seemed to move off. When he looked at Sara one tear had found its way down her face. He wiped it away and smiled.

"So," she asked, "Tell me, Harry, what happened at the end of year feast? You didn't eat much at our dinner. You didn't fill up down there, did you?"

"Actually, the three of us left right after the ceremony. Hermione was named Head Girl for next year in advance. They haven't announced Head Boy yet, but it's sure to be Malfoy. And we won the House Cup again, but Ravenclaw almost beat us. Slytherin came in third, having beat Hufflepuff by only a few points. They're really losing their edge."

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"Well, when Malfoy's your ring leader..." Sara smiled, "I can't believe Hermione didn't tell me! How wonderful, it's such an *honor* to be chosen Head Girl! And the fact that they announced it already means it was *no contest*. I'll have to send her an owl to congratulate her."

"I'm sure she'd appreciate it." He said and allowed her to lead him to the couch in front of the fire.

They sat together, watching the flames, not speaking. Harry's arm pulled her closer and she leaned against him, letting the time pass, for in the morning, he would be gone.

* * *

It was close to midnight when they heard a knock at the door. Sara jumped up and motioned for Harry to get out of sight. He concealed himself in the next room, where he could still hear, and Sara opened the door. It was Snape, to Harry's surprise, and he listened even harder.

"The *potion* you asked for."

"Thank you, Severus, and I appreciate your discretion."

Snape took a few steps into the room and sort-of glared at her. "I must say *again* that I do not approve of your... *need* for such a potion. I can't help thinking that your little boyfriend is rather *insincere*.

Seems a pity to waste your virtue on someone who's, no doubt, only looking to *line his pockets*."

"I assure you, Severus, I don't make such decisions lightly. Besides, he doesn't even know. I think you misjudge him."

"Not if he's anything like his father."

"His *father* has nothing to do with it. That's not fair."

"I've never had much interest in being fair." Snape said, "Only in being *honest*."

"Well, as unfortunate as your *limited* views may be, I appreciate this and will forgive your misjudgments. You've been a friend and I won't forget it."

"Try to make your mother proud, my dear. Although I'm sure she wouldn't be, *come morning*." Snape walked into the doorway, and then looked back to her, disapproval on his face, disappointment in his eyes. "Good night, Sara." he said and went out.

Sara hung her head, the comment stinging. She looked at the small vial in her hand, wondering if what she was doing was right. She loved Harry, but was this the time?

"What is it?" Harry asked, coming back into the room, "What was he talking about? What did he give you?"

"Yesterday you mentioned a potion." they sat on the sofa, "I asked him about it and he said he knew of one. I asked him to prepare it for me." She regarded the little vial, "He assured me he wouldn't tell, but made it clear that he doesn't approve."

"I can't believe you went to *him* for such a thing." Harry said, feeling suddenly anxious, "I mean, weren't you afraid?"

"Of course I was. What if he went straight to Uncle Albus? And then he *could have* refused

altogether."

"Then why'd you do it?"

"Because we want to be together, Harry. It was the only way."

Harry just looked at her as butterflies, nervous ones, raced around his stomach.

"Now, I'm going to get ready for bed. And then, whether or not we use this is up to us." She smiled and left the room.

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Harry undressed to his underclothing, laying his robe and his school clothes over the chair by the bed. He climbed under the covers and pulled them up to his chin even though the night was warm. His mind raced until Sara returned and joined him, setting the potion on the stand by the bed. Harry's heart was hammering in his chest.

"Harry, you're shaking."

"So are you." Harry said as he lay on his side, looking across the pillows at her. She reached over and took his hand, smiling a little in the moonlight.

Harry smiled and moved into the center of the bed where she met him and his arm went around her shoulders, her head finding its usual place.

"What he said about you're mother," Harry said, "don't listen to him. He knew it would bother you. It's the only reason he said it."

"But what if he's right? What if I *should* be ashamed and I don't know it?"

"You should do what you know in your heart is right."

"But suddenly I'm not sure. I was sure all the way up to this moment."

"You're scared."

"And you're not?"

"Of course I am. Actually, I'm quite terrified."

Sara laughed, "I can't believe it. Not you, Captain. You're not afraid of *anything*."

Harry propped his head on his elbow and looked down at her, thinking her beautiful, even in the dark. He kissed her, wishing he could calm his nerves, and she still trembled under his soft caresses. "I love you, Sara," he whispered and she answered, tangling a hand in his hair, wrapping an arm around his back to pull him closer. A passion quickly arose between them, but their usual frenzied desire did not. It was sweeter, more affection than physical attraction and Harry lingered above her, thinking he would have to leave her in only a few hours.

* * *

Harry awoke in the early light to music from another room. It was Sara, playing her piano. Her voice rose and fell, and there was none of the morose tone of the night before. This morning her song was bittersweet.

He rose and found the room, dressed only in his tee-shirt and shorts and she smiled when she saw him in the doorway, listening. She was wearing his white shirt, the one he wore with his robe and tie to classes, and he thought she looked great in it.

The song ended and she walked to where he was, sadness and love radiating from her in a mix of expression. "Morning, Harry."

"Good morning." He smiled, "You know, I never realized how small you were until I saw you in my clothes."

She glanced down at the shirt, "I wanted to be close to you, but I didn't want to wake you. Sorry."

"It's okay. In fact, why don't you keep it? I've got others."

"I think I'll sleep in it every night until you come back," she glanced at the floor, and then back at him,

"You're train leaves in two hours, Harry. I wish I could go down to see you off."

"It's probably better this way." He smiled, "I bet I'd make a fool of myself, saying goodbye to you."

"Too bad you can't *accidentally* miss the train."

Harry pulled her into a soft embrace and kissed the top of her head. "Sara," he sighed, "This is so hard."

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She clung to him, determined not to cry until after he'd gone. "You were right, you know. It isn't such a long time. I think we'll be alright." She tried to assure him, though similar thoughts were on her own mind.

"I'm going to get some money set aside. And when I graduate next year I'll be able to take care of you. I promise I will."

"Harry, we'll deal with that when the time comes. Really."

"It's what I want to do. I'm going to get a job, a muggle job, and I'll save every penny."

"Don't be ridiculous. Enjoy the summer. You've got the rest of your life to *work*. I insist."

He smiled, knowing he would do no such thing. He had his parent's savings at Gringott's, but it wasn't what he wanted. Wizard gold was useful in the wizarding world, but both he and Sara had been raised as muggles. They wanted muggle accommodations and that took muggle *money*.

They had some morning tea on the roof, snuggled together, wrapped in a blanket, watching Hagrid go about his morning chores in the distance.

"I don't even have a picture of you." Sara said, her head resting against his shoulder.

"I gave Colin Creevey some money at the party. He promised to send me a set of the pictures he took at the Quidditch Cup. I'll send you one when I get them."

"But you don't have a picture of *me*, Harry."

"I don't need one."

Harry set down his cup and kissed her, the emotion he was trying to hide flooding him, overpowering everything.

With a great rush of wings, Fawks hovered above them. He carried a letter, but didn't drop it until Harry and Sara moved apart.

"Look at that, a bird with manners." Sara said.

Harry opened the note, knowing what it would tell him before he ever saw the text. Time was running short and he still hadn't changed clothes for the trip. They would need to take his trunk soon.

Dear Harry,

Please do not miss the train.

Sincerely,

Professor Dumbledore

"It's time, Sara. I have to go." Harry stood.

Sara got to her feet. She held his eyes for a long moment, wanting to say too many things. "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you, too," he said and pulled her into a close embrace, "I'll write as soon as I can."

"I'll write as soon as you leave." She smiled and kissed him one last time. "Now go, Harry. I can't bear to see you walk out the door."

He left her there on the roof, her back to him, thunder rolling in the distance.

* * *

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Harry was rushing to meet Ron and Hermione, who waited for him on the far side of the dining hall. He'd made it almost to the head of the Hufflepuff table when Snape stepped into his path. Harry was tall enough to look him in the eye now, and it was hard to believe that he was once afraid of him.

Snape glared accusingly.

"Interesting night, *Potter*?"

"Is there something I can do for you, Professor?" Harry asked without even a hint of a smile, "I don't want to miss the train."

"I find that hard to believe." Snape scowled, "Seems unlikely that an *upstanding* young man - such as yourself - would be so anxious to be...*on his way*."

Harry took a step forward, closing the gap between them. He was finished with the man's vicious insinuations and thought it about time he let him know. He was inches from Snape, who grew incensed by his daring, but he stood his ground. "There will come a day when I'm not a student anymore. I hope you're ready for it."

"A duel then?" Snape grinned. "This day next year?"

"Nothing would make me happier, *Snape*."

"You *will* address me respectfully, *Potter*."

"I give respect where it's due." Harry's eyes narrowed, "School is out."

"You should be careful who you threaten, Mr. Potter. You may find yourself in a situation where your *meager* intelligence proves no match for years of wisdom, knowledge, and superior *skill*."

Harry chuckled. "Don't flatter yourself. See you in September, *Snape*." He walked away, leaving Snape disarmed and fumbling for some clever retort.

Ron and Hermione had watched the exchange from across the room, unable to hear what was said.

They waited impatiently until the three of them had settled into a carriage before attacking Harry with a barrage of questions, getting no direct answers.

"But *Harry*," Ron insisted, "you got right in his *face*! We saw the whole thing. What did he say?"

"Nothing really. Just Snape being his usual *charming* self."

Ron finally gave up when they reached the platform, to Harry's relief. Most of the students had already boarded and they saw Hagrid ushering the rest onto the train, which would be leaving within a few minutes.

"Save me a seat," Harry told Ron, "I have to say goodbye to Hagrid."

Hagrid smiled as Harry approached, "Mornin' Harry. Better get on the train soon."

"I will. I just wanted to say so long."

"Ain't seen much of ya lately. Been keeping busy?"

"I'm sorry, Hagrid. I've been a bit...preoccupied."

"So I've heard. It's a shame, that poor girl bein' hid like that, but if Albus Dumbledore says it has to be, then *it has to be*. But I'm sure glad she had some company."

Harry smiled; he hadn't known Hagrid was aware of Sara's presence, otherwise he would have taken her out to visit his cabin under the cloak. He noticed Hagrid carried a large umbrella, even though the sky was clear. Evidently, he was expecting a storm.

"I'll see you in the fall. Take care, Hagrid."

"You, too, Harry." Hagrid said, "And you better write!"

The train's whistle blew and Harry hurried to the nearest open door. He looked back and waved before disappearing into the car.

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He found Ron and Hermione easily enough, as Ron was hanging half out of the compartment, looking for him. Harry took his seat with downcast eyes and looked out at the castle, silent. The whistle sounded one last time and they pulled away, Hogwarts sliding slowly out of view. It began to rain.

* * *

Snape found Sara on the roof, standing in the midst of a furious storm, shaking with cold and overwhelming emotion, her head hung, her arms limp at her sides, her hair in her face. He walked to

the edge of the overhang, watching, unsure how to approach her. She was despondent, soaked to the bone and the image was heartrending. He realized he'd never despised Harry Potter the way he did at this moment.

Finally, he ventured into the driving rain and went to her side; putting a gentle arm on her shoulders. "Come inside, my dear." he spoke softly and turned her, leading her to shelter. She never looked up or spoke, only allowed herself to be led.

The fire was cold, but he brought it to life with a wave of his hand. He wrapped her with a blanket and sat her on the sofa. Sara looked at the floor, her stringy hair hiding her eyes. The black, he saw, had enveloped a third of her head.

He disappeared for several minutes and returned with a cup of hot tea, which he placed in her trembling hands. She sipped it and lowered it to the table. Music, one of her mother's old recordings, filled the room, taking Snape off guard. He sat at the other end of the couch, his eyes on the stereo. "It's been years since I've heard her voice." He told Sara, "She used to perform for us in the dining hall sometimes after dinner. Everyone loved to hear her sing."

Sara barely acknowledged, nodding her head only slightly. She stared at the cup of tea before her. "I was in love with your mother, Sara." he admitted, "but I made the wrong choices. She turned away from me and with good reason. I've never held it against her."

"Then you understand how it feels to lose someone you love." Sara looked to him, her voice choked and unsteady, her eyes reddened from crying. "But you pretend you don't."

"I came here to apologize for what I said last night. It was wrong of me to presume to know how Diana would feel. If you want to be a fool, Sara, it's no business of mine."

Sara reached under the blanket and regarded the vial Snape had given her before setting on the table between them. It still held its contents. She was angry and Snape said nothing.

"Evidently, my *insincere* little boyfriend is more of a gentleman than you know."

She leaned her head against the side of the couch, no longer able to look at him, the music growing louder. Snape stayed where he was, humbled, his eyes remaining on the vial. Eventually, he left without a word.

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4. A Hard Day's Night

His little room at the Dursley's (which he could never quite call home) looked even more uninviting than he remembered. It was drab, hadn't been painted in years, and was no more than a bad memory. His things looked rummaged through and, no doubt, they had been, although he had no *real* belongings here. Just some old clothes which were *still* too big and a scattering of junk he once cherished. All he needed or cared about was locked in his trunk.

Harry opened the room's only window and placed Hedwig's cage next to it, opening the door for her to stretch her wings after the long journey. "Don't go far, girl." he told her, "You'll have a letter to carry soon."

Hedwig hooted her response and flew only into a neighboring tree. Harry opened his trunk, which he no longer kept under the stairs, and pulled out the little box he'd found on his Hogwarts bed. Inside were a quill and an ample supply of parchment, also a note, which he unfolded and re-read.

Dear Harry,

I assume you and Sara will be putting the owls to good use this summer, however, I insist you use this special quill and paper. It is equipped with a spell that will not allow your letters to be read by anyone other than Sara, as we cannot risk an interception.

Enjoy the summer,

Professor Dumbledore

He could hear the Dursleys downstairs, arguing about Harry's return. Dudley wanted his father to put the locks back on Harry's door so they wouldn't have to fear his magic in the night. Uncle Vernon felt that Harry was old enough to be on his own, he was almost *seventeen*, after all. Harry couldn't hear Aunt Petunia's words, but her hateful tone reached his ears just fine. Harry had had enough.

He went only halfway down the stairs, just far enough so he could see them and they could hear what he had to say. It was his Uncle Vernon he spoke to, but he wanted them all to listen.

"Do you think I *want* to be here?" he shouted, "Well I *don't*. But I haven't got anywhere else to live. I'd stay at school all year if they'd let me."

Uncle Vernon narrowed his eyes in warning. Harry lowered his voice.

"I need a job, Uncle Vernon. I need to save enough money so that when I leave school next summer I can get a place of my own. I need to learn to drive a car. I don't want to come back here again." Harry hesitated, watching their faces. "If you want the same then help me."

Uncle Vernon's expression did a full reversal. "In that case, Harry, I'll see what I can do for you. I have a friend that hires summer help. I suppose I could give him a call. Driving lessons start tomorrow." His tone was almost pleasant.

"Thank you." Harry said and went back to his room. He pulled out the enchanted quill and a bottle of ink. He sat at his desk and composed his letter.

Dear Sara,

I miss you already. I got here only to find that nothing had changed. There is nothing here that I love.

I would rather be back at Hogwarts, with you in your tower.

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Uncle Vernon thinks he might be able to get me a job. I hope so, even if it doesn't pay much, at least it will get me out of here. I know you asked me not to work, but how can I not? If I'm going to have any

hope of being on my own after next year, I have to arrange everything now. I hope you understand why.

Uncle Vernon has also said he will teach me to drive, which is something I look forward to.

I've been here less than an hour and already our separation is harder than I thought it would be. I can't stop thinking of you and wishing Dumbledore would change his mind. I guess we both know he won't and I shouldn't remind you of it. It does neither of us any good to dwell on the impossible. I hope you're alright, Sara. It was raining when I left.

I look forward to your letter.

Love Always,

Harry

Hedwig was resting on the sill when Harry rose from his chair. "Take this to Sara," he told the snowy owl, "She'll take care of you until she sends her reply." Hedwig took the letter and was off in a rush of feathers. After she'd gone Harry was even more lonely, the room all the more empty.

Aunt Petunia drove him to his first day of work and she wasn't happy about it, not in the least. She practically threw the lunch she'd prepared at him, which he was surprised to get at all. She dropped him in front of a large office building. "You'll have to find your own way home. I *won't* be driving you again," she scowled from the front seat. Dudley scowled, too, but said nothing. "And your Uncle has instructed Mr. Spaulding to sack you if you're late even once, so I suggest you get yourself in there."

"Yes Aunt Petunia," Harry said dryly.

She drove off much too quickly and Harry looked nervously at the towering building. *At least it's not the slaughterhouse*, he thought. He wore his school uniform, a plain white shirt and dark pants, minus the robe and sweater, with one of Uncle Vernon's old ties. They were the only proper clothes he had. His wand was concealed in his sock.

Mr. Spaulding eyed Harry suspiciously, but seemed tolerable enough after the Dursleys. He sat behind a large desk, cluttered with files and paperwork, studying him with a suspicious leer.

"I understand you're not Oxford material, Potter, but that's alright. You won't need much of a brain for the job you'll be doing," He said this as if to put Harry at ease. "But I want to get one thing straight. I don't want any *trouble* from you. I don't know what they teach you at the school for *criminal* boys, but I won't have it in my office. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"I don't usually hire your kind, Harry. I'm doing this as a favor to your uncle. He told me you need money for *moving expenses* so I was only too happy to help. You won't make me sorry will you?"

"I won't, sir."

"Good. And I won't tolerate slackers. You're here to work."

"I'll do my best, Mr. Spaulding."

"I certainly hope so. I'd *hate* to have to tell your uncle you'd been sacked." He handed Harry a stack of paperwork, clipped together. "Now, go fill these out and give them to the receptionist when you're done. Someone will be along to show you to your post."

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"Thank you, Mr. Spaulding," Harry smiled.

He gave Harry a false smile and Harry went out, his self-confidence at less than best.

The job he was to do turned out to be better than he thought. Not great, but he worked alone in a massive underground room of endless files. It was cool in the basement and he was glad of it. He liked the quiet and the solitude. And all Harry had to do was find old files and box them up, load them on a cart and take them down the hall to the mailroom for shipment to another office. Then there were the new files which he had to open and arrange in a certain order before putting them in their proper places on the shelves. It was simple and Harry worked quickly.

The boxes weighed a ton and, after a few hours, loading them onto the cart became strenuous and he wished he could use his wand. He worked tirelessly, enthusiastically even, right through until lunch. Harry found he was starving and decided to eat outside. Carrying Uncle Vernon's old lunchbox, he made his way to the back of the building, where a few picnic tables were scattered about. He found one empty and out of the sun and nearly tore open the box, having not eaten any breakfast in his rush to leave this morning. What he found made him sit in silent shock. Plain crackers, unwrapped and broken, and a poorly rinsed out mustard jar, filled with water. His spirits sank. Harry dumped it into the nearest trash can and went for a walk.

He figured he could circle the block a few times and the hunger might go away. It gnawed at his empty stomach, begging for any sort of sustenance. Harry had no money at all, he realized as he longingly passed a busy deli, and it renewed his desire to make as much as he could. He would have to buy his own lunch, which meant he wouldn't be eating until payday. He would also have to buy some new clothes. His first check was surely already spent.

He turned the corner and passed several businesses before coming to a stop in front of a market. The sign in the window said *Help Wanted*. Harry went in.

The walk home took just over an hour. Aunt Petunia was clearing the supper dishes when he went into the kitchen, drenched with sweat from his five mile trek and *ravenous*.

"We didn't think you were coming," She said, "Dinner was served at five-thirty."

"Are there any leftovers?"

"No." She smirked, "I had Dudley toss them to the neighbor's dog. You can have an apple if you'd like."

Harry was incredulous. "Aunt Petunia! I'm *starving*! I've had nothing to eat since yesterday!"

"I seem to remember handing you a lunch this morning, unless I'm mistaken."

"You call that a lunch?" He yelled, "A few crumbs and some water? They eat better in *prison*!"

"Then perhaps that's where you belong," she sneered, her ugly face contorted with disgust at the sight of him, "You'll watch your tone in this house. And you'll be thankful for our generosity or you and that *repulsive* owl will find yourselves out with the trash." Harry seethed, but took the apple and sat down at the table with it.

"What's all this noise about?" Uncle Vernon bellowed as he entered the room.

"That *boy*," Aunt Petunia said and tilted her chin at Harry, her hands in a sink full of dishes, "He's so ungrateful. It's sickening the way he just barges in here, complaining about the food he's given."

"Now Harry," said his uncle, "there will be no more complaining out of you."

"I didn't mean to, Uncle Vernon. I'm just so *hungry*," he looked at the pitiful apple.

"Make a sandwich, then, Harry. But stop pestering your Aunt."

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Harry leapt from the table and ran to the refrigerator. He took two slices of bread and piled anything he could find onto them.

"And don't go cleaning us out." Aunt Petunia said over her shoulder.

Harry sat across from Uncle Vernon as he devoured the sandwich, chewing as fast as he could without drawing attention. When he was done, his uncle looked up from the evening paper.

"Mr. Spaulding called, Harry. He seemed quite pleased with you. He said you were no trouble and that you'd managed a bit more work than the average summer help."

"He did? He said that?"

"It's a good thing. I'd *hate to be you* if the report was negative." Uncle Vernon raised an eyebrow at Harry, another warning. "You'll do best to keep it up."

"I will! I don't really mind the work. The boxes are heavy, but I manage them alright." He turned to his Aunt, who was busy putting away dishes. "Aunt Petunia, if it isn't too much trouble, would you mind setting aside a plate for me for awhile?"

"That's better, Harry." She half smiled, "I'll see what I can do."

"It's just that I got an evening job and I won't be home until late. I can't afford to buy any food until I get paid."

Uncle Vernon sat up. "An *evening* job? I must say, Harry, you are most ambitious this summer. You must really *hate it* here in our home."

Harry had a lot to say to that remark, but kept it to himself. It would do no good to get them all riled up again. "There's a market around the corner from the office. Trucks come in around six and they need someone to unload them. It's during the week and they'll let me work until eleven."

"That's excellent, Harry!" Uncle Vernon smiled, "A good day's work never hurt anyone. Perhaps you'll find it so enjoyable you'll forget about all this other nonsense. *Magic tricks*," he shook his head, "Now get changed, boy. I won't wait all night. I'll be in the car."

Harry had forgotten all about his driving lessons. He'd just have to do it on the weekends. But for right now, he couldn't wait to get behind the wheel.

* * *

Harry slipped into the kitchen before going to bed and grabbed an apple and two cookies, wrapped in a paper napkin. He would save them for lunch the next day, just in case he got prison rations again or nothing at all.

He thought about his first, and rather substantial, three hour long driving lesson. Uncle Vernon decided that Harry was "a natural", like a duck in water, and taught him all he could, saying "No reason to drag this out, Harry." He said he'd pick up some literature on road rules that Harry could read in his spare time, then they would go out again over the weekend.

Harry was more exhausted than he'd been in a long time. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so tired. His muscles ached all over, his back was painfully sore and all he wanted to do was go to sleep.

There was a brown barn owl on the back of his desk chair when he went into his room, a letter on the desktop. *Captain*, was all it said in long, slanted script. Harry's heart leapt and he smiled. He carried the owl to Hedwig's cage and it climbed onto the perch.

Harry sat on his bed with the letter, restraining himself from tearing it open. He couldn't wait to read her words.

Dear Harry,

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Hedwig arrived this morning and we had some toast together. She's just fine, but restless. I think she wants to get back to you, but I decided she should rest before the trip. I will send her back with my next letter.

I wrote to you a short time after you left, but decided not to send it. Too sappy and depressing. Snape had come to visit and I couldn't take his biting remarks anymore. I was a bit short-tempered with him, but I believe he'll think more about what he says. For awhile, anyway. Sometimes I think you're right about him, but I've seen a different side, too.

I'm glad to hear your uncle was willing to help with the job. I'll say again that you don't have to work. I wish you would trust me, Harry. Spend the money you earn if you just want to get out of the house.

And don't let them get you down, it's only for the summer, then you can say goodbye to them for good. You'll never have to see them again.

Now that the students have gone home, I am allowed to walk freely about the castle and I get to eat meals with Uncle Albus and Hagrid. (Can you believe they sit alone in that enormous dining hall?) Filch is still here, too, but he sleeps most of the day, which I am glad of. The man is a little frightening sometimes.

I am allowed outside, too, and spend most of my time wandering the grounds. I can't remember the last time I felt grass under my feet! Today I went to the edge of the Forbidden Forest and visited with a Unicorn. It was amazing, all I did was sing this song my mother taught me that's supposed to bring them, and it worked! It was so refreshing to be out in the sunshine and in the presence of such magnificent beauty. And it helped my spirit immeasurably.

I got an owl from Ron today, (such a pathetic little bird that is) and he sent some cookies his mother made. He said he's also gotten a job, helping his father at the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office, which he'll start tomorrow. His twin brothers are planning to expand their joke shop in Diagon Alley and he's helping them raise the money. It's so nice of him; he even gave up the chance to go to Romania. Hermione also wrote and sent me some magazines. She said she's even sent for a catalog from Versace (one of my favorite stores) and will pass it on to me when it comes. She bought a blank book and plans to fill it with her favorite spells, charms, and potions. I showed her my mother's during the first lunch we had together and she's been fired up about it ever since.

It's hard to believe the three of you have only been gone for two days! Already it seems like forever. I don't have much to do here except write letters, wander around, and bother Uncle Albus. Hagrid has invited me to his cabin later to feed the blast-ended skrewts and I can't even tell you how I'm looking forward to it.

Perhaps I should make a book, like Hermione. I know a lot of good spells and I can gather more in the library. It would keep me busy for awhile. But now, I must go to dinner.

I miss you, Harry. I slept in your shirt last night and woke up at dawn, only to find you weren't there. There's an emptiness, a void, and it's hard to bear, but I'll get through the days, and the nights, because you asked me to.

I love you.

Sara

Harry wanted badly to sleep, but got out Dumbledore's box of paper anyway. It would have to be short, it was almost eleven and he'd have to get up very early if he was to walk five miles and be at his post on time. He dipped the quill in the ink.

Dear Sara,

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It's great that you can leave your tower! And it's easier for me to think of you shoeless on the grass, singing to unicorns, rather than drinking endless glasses of wine, apart from all the world. It's a happier image and quite a relief for me. Hagrid is good company, as you probably have found out, but I can't say much for the skrewts.

I think your spell book is a good idea and I'm glad Hermione's making one. She knows millions of spells, I think. She seems to remember every word she reads. It will end up being about ten volumes long if I know her.

I had my first driving lesson today and I did rather well. I can't park yet and backing up was a bit rough, but I could handle the steering and work the peddles just fine. It won't be long until I can get my driver's license and next year we'll go for a ride to the coast together. I picture myself in a rusty old clunker with mismatched doors and a broken muffler, spewing stinky gray exhaust out the tailpipe. I know you deserve better, and someday I will get it for you, even if I have to work eight days a week and sleep only on my lunch hour.

My job is alright. My new boss told Uncle Vernon I was doing well and that makes me happy. All I have to do is box old files and put the new ones on the shelves. It's not rocket science, but I'm finally making money. On Friday, I shall receive the first muggle pound note I've ever had! I can only hope you're proud of me, Sara.

I'm sorry this is so short, it's late and I have to get up before dawn, but I wanted you to know how much I miss you. I think of you all the time, wondering how you are and if you're as lonely as I am. The past two days have seemed like ages, but I'll get through each one to come just by knowing that you're there, thinking of me, too. I love you, Sara.

Love,

Harry

As he was folding the letter, another owl flew in through the window, carrying a package, which it dropped in Harry's lap. It landed on the chair and Harry carried it to Hedwig's cage. The barn owl Sara had sent seemed perturbed by the new owl's presence and hooted in protest. "Well it's not *your* cage, either!" Harry told it.

He hurried back to the package, yawning while he unwrapped it, not recognizing the scratchy handwriting on the outside. He smiled as soon as he saw it was from Colin Creevey. The pictures from the Quidditch Cup! Suddenly he felt more awake and flipped through them, searching for one of himself. There was one he liked a great deal; one the team had posed for. He and Ron holding the cup between them with Fred and George behind it, each with an arm around the two female chasers, Regina and Molly. Liam Seever lounged on the ground in front, his head propped on one hand, Harry's Firebolt in the other. They were all smiling, elated really, and it made him happy just to look at it. He longed to be back at Hogwarts. And he longed to ride his Firebolt again.

He propped the picture against his lamp, deciding to have it enlarged when he had some money, and

went back to the others. He found the one he wanted near the bottom and pulled it out. Colin, who used a muggle camera, had insisted he take a shot of the Team Captain alone and had made him pose with his broom in one hand and the Quidditch Cup under his arm. Harry remembered feeling rather foolish, but Colin was more talented than he'd thought. The picture was great! Colin kept insisting Harry smile, but he hadn't felt natural and Colin knew. He didn't take the picture until Ron stood off to the side and made faces until he laughed. Sara would love it, he knew, so he enclosed it with her letter. He put the rest of the pictures into his backpack, along with the box from Dumbledore, some old clothes, and the little bit of food he'd taken from the kitchen. He made sure his alarm was set for 6AM before getting into bed and looked at his winning team one more time before turning out the light.

* * *

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Friday came quicker than Harry expected, having been working from eight to five at the office and then six to eleven at the market, which had turned out to be back-breaking labor. He preferred his evening job, though. He liked the other employees and the fact that he didn't have to say he went to a school for criminals. He usually worked with three or four other people, so he rarely got an opportunity to use his wand instead of his muscles, and the exhaustion he felt after his long walk home was sometimes overwhelming.

He used his lunch hours at the office to write to Sara. Otherwise his letters would have been a few tired lines at best and he knew she awaited his owls. He didn't want to leave her disappointed. Besides, the lunches he got from Aunt Petunia only took a moment to eat, so he didn't bother going out to the tables behind the building. There were no more crackers, but a cheese or peanut butter sandwich, an apple, and a thermos of water. It still left him hungry, but it was better than nothing. Come Monday, he thought with a smile, he would buy his lunch at the little deli across the street. After that he would buy some supplies and fix his own lunches at home. And he had to eat dinner between jobs. He could no longer suffer the pain in his stomach for twelve hours until he got the child's portions Aunt Petunia left for him in the oven.

Harry fell onto his bed at twelve-thirty, too pleased with himself to sleep. There were letters from everyone on the desk, and the tree outside was full of owls. Ron, Hermione, Hagrid and, of course, Sara, had written. He wouldn't answer any of them tonight, though, except one. He was excited to write to Sara, since he hadn't at work, and tell her all about his day. But first, he would read her letter.

Dear Harry,

Congratulations! Happy Payday! How does that muggle money feel in your pocket? I can't believe you actually wondered if I would be proud of you. Harry, I would be proud of you no matter what. How could I possibly love you more?

Make sure you spend some of that money on yourself, you deserve it after all. My father worked on Wall Street in New York, and he said office jobs were terribly mundane. He always wanted to do something different, but never got the chance. I hope you're not wasting your evenings. You should get out and do things, go to see some movies at least. You never mention what you do after work. As for me, things have taken a turn. Uncle Albus found out I was visiting the unicorns and strictly forbid me to go anywhere near the forest. He says dark things lurk there. Well they do, but so do beautiful things! I cried for hours afterward and wouldn't speak to him at dinner. I think I upset him and I feel terrible, but he doesn't understand. He's trying to protect me, but he's hurting me, too. Harry, he took my bottle of Riesling. What does he expect me to do? The castle was fun to explore, but it's mostly empty rooms! Though released from my tower, I'm still so alone. Even the Marauder's Map is boring, the same three names going who cares where. I used to look at it for hours, following names from place to place. I actually think I liked it better before. True, I could only leave the tower for short periods of time, but at least there was some life in the castle. I guess that's what happens when a thousand people leave a place, there's simply nothing left but ghosts. The days here are centuries long and the nights, well, they're just empty.

I still sleep in your shirt and am so glad you let me keep it. I feel so close to you while I wear it, it's one of the few things that bring me comfort. I look at your picture every night and miss you even more. I can't wait to see you again.

Love,

Sara

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Harry sighed. Her letter had started out so well, only to end with desperation. He was glad Dumbledore had taken her bottle of wine, Harry hated the way she drank away her boredom and thought it best for her. But why forbid her to see the unicorns? She wasn't going *in* the forest, only standing on the edge of it, like every Hogwarts student had done at least once. He himself had been sent into the trees when Voldemort was a threat to him (and he'd encountered him there), but Dumbledore hadn't forbidden *that*! Something wasn't making sense. Sara had promised to tell him about the hooded figure that came in the night and he was sure she had, obviously *someone* knew she was there. Someone dark and threatening enough to cause pain in his scar. Why worry about the forest? After all, Sara could handle herself if trouble came about, just like she'd handled Malfoy. Harry took out his enchanted quill and wrote his reply.

Sara,

I'm so very sorry about the unicorns. I know you love them and it makes no sense to keep you from them. I'd think Dumbledore would permit you anything that could lift your spirits the way they do, after all, he let me visit your tower for that very reason. There must be something he's not telling us. I doubt he would refuse you happiness without reason. Don't be too hard on him.

You couldn't have explored the entire castle in just over a week! Keep looking! Also, spend as much time as you can in the library. Work on compiling spells for your book; it will fill some of the hours. Spend your time, Sara, don't waste it. You're more or less stuck there; you might as well make the most of it.

Today on my lunch hour I went to the bank near the office and opened an account. I'm so thrilled, Sara, I've got money saved already! I kept a little for myself, of course, but it's the savings that make me happiest and I look forward to next Friday with even greater enthusiasm.

I'm tired now, and have three letters to read before I can sleep. I don't have to work tomorrow, so I will write you a longer letter then and tell you all about my second driving lesson. (I've studied the book on road rules all week and I think I know it verbatim. It won't be long!) It doesn't really matter if it takes all summer, I won't have a car to drive until next year anyway, it's just that I'm excited about it.

Keep your chin up, Sara, we'll be together soon. I miss you as always.

Love,

Harry

He gave the letter to Hedwig, along with a tiny gold bracelet he'd found in a boutique. There were a few little purple gemstones on it, and Sara loved purple, he knew. He thought of her the moment he saw it, walking past between jobs. He took most of the money for it from his food allowance, but he'd wanted to give her something nice, something special to cheer her up. Being denied Unicorns had to be a terrible loss for Sara, and Harry could only imagine how deeply it had affected her. He wanted to rescue her from such loneliness, take her out of the castle and back into the world where she longed to be. He would have to settle for making her smile.

Harry went to the window, inhaling a strong breeze, having just drifted into his room. There was a scent that drew an easy smile on his face and he closed his eyes, resting his elbows on the sill. Her perfume on the wind, an ancient Gypsy infusion, rich with spices, especially ginger, sandalwood, and something light and airy. It was the essence of everything Sara.

He could hear something, it was faint and far away, but he could just make it out. Her voice, carried on the wind. She was singing.

* * *

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Harry awoke from a seamless, heavy night of sleep. It was a dreamless sleep, like that of the dead, and he felt refreshed. He wasn't surprised to see it was noon, especially since he hadn't gone to bed until two in the morning. What he couldn't believe was that the Dursleys hadn't tried to get him up. Or maybe they had?

One of the school's owls was on the back of his chair when he sat up and he jumped out of bed at the sight of it. Sara always sent her owls just before dinner, so it must be something important for her to write again so soon, Harry thought. He carefully tore the envelope and dropped back onto the bed with the letter.

Dear Harry,

Thank you for the bracelet, it's beautiful and I love amethysts. I'll wear it everyday, of course. You shouldn't be spending your money on me, though. (Have you even gotten yourself anything yet?) I was so surprised when I opened it; I couldn't stop smiling and kept looking at it. You really managed to brighten the evening, especially one as horrible as last night.

Uncle Albus has really gone too far. I cried all night and through breakfast. I can look out and see Hagrid going about his chores in the rain, and I feel terrible, but I can't seem to stop. Harry, my last and most important freedom has been stripped from me. The thing that made it all bearable. How does he expect me to sleep? I need fresh air to drift into my room at night, I always have! He made me close the doors. He even put a spell on them not to open until dawn! I don't know what to do. I feel like I'm suffocating.

Last night I wedged open one of the windows in the music parlor and slept on the piano. I will keep this window open at all times, so instruct Hedwig to bring your next letter there. It's where I'll be. Harry, I never told Uncle Albus about the hooded figure. I promised you I would, and I'm sorry, but in the end I couldn't do it. It was because I was afraid of this very thing!

I'm losing it, really. I don't know how much longer I can stay here, not like this. Something has to change or I'll lose my mind. I think you are probably the only thing that keeps me sane.

I love you.

Sara

Harry sighed. What was he to do? And what was Dumbledore keeping from her? He got out his quill.

Dear Sara,

I think Dumbledore found out about the stranger, it's the only logical explanation. I know you're upset, but he's right. I've hated the fact that you left the doors open with such a threat lurking just outside. And if it fears me, like you say, and not the teachers, then closing the doors is more important than ever. I can't protect you at all from here.

Try to remember that Dumbledore only wants to keep you from harm and from having to display your power, confirming what Voldemort already believes to be true. You have to hang in there. It won't be long.

I can't write much now, I'm hungry and if I miss lunch then Aunt Petunia won't let me have anything else. I'd have to walk to the deli near where I work to get a sandwich and my feet can't stand the thought. I think I'll stick around here today, work on my own spell book. After a little thought, I decided we should all make one, if we can convince Ron that is. They would be ka-tet, like the four of us. You never know, great wizards like us could be the legends of the future! Well, maybe.

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I think we need to employ more owls. I also wish we could use floo powder, so we could visit each other, but as it turns out, neither one of us can. My house isn't on the circuit and Hogwarts is completely blocked. Apparating would be nice, too, but the school is protected from that, as well. Believe me, I've thought of everything, including riding my broom and that insane bus that picked me up once. Simply nothing is doable.

I will write to you again later, after I have eaten and had my driving lesson. Don't be mad at me for siding with Dumbledore. I think he's probably the wisest person alive. I would do whatever he asked and so should you. He only wants to keep you from harm, and I do as well. For all the same reasons. I miss you.

Love, Harry

* * *

Sara's letters changed over the next three weeks, they grew more distressed, and Harry was really starting to worry about her. She no longer sounded like herself. She was half mad with boredom, her owls ranting and incredibly long. She was no longer allowed to sleep in her tower, or even go there after dark, and many of her belongings had been moved to a large, square chamber with no windows and one heavy door. She was not allowed to wander the castle alone and was to remain in the new room after Dumbledore retired for the night.

Harry got the idea that something had happened, probably the night Dumbledore closed the doors to the roof, through slips she made when she wrote frantically. He always knew when this was, because her usually neat, flowing script became run-on sentences and misspelled words in quick, messy hand. Ron and Hermione sent owls, insisting he do something. He had written to Dumbledore several times with concerns about Sara's state of mind and had asked extensively about his reason's behind her lack of fresh air, which he knew was her biggest problem. She was becoming increasingly claustrophobic, he'd explained to Dumbledore, who simply wouldn't give a precise answer.

Harry sat on his bed, holding her most recent letter, only just arrived with Hedwig. It was light, not one of the long, rambling ones, and Harry wondered if that was good or bad news. He was almost afraid to open it. Finally, he did.

Dear Harry,

I know you're going to be upset with me, but I'm leaving Hogwarts the second the spell wears off the door at daybreak. I can't stay here another moment if I am to remain of sound mind. He keeps me prisoner in here, and my room is a cell, with stale, dead air and no sky to speak of. All I do is read books, which I am thankful for, and pace the floor.

To make matters worse, Uncle Albus has written to Severus, asking him to immediately return. If I don't get out of here before he arrives I won't stand a chance. He's to sleep in the room across the hall. I will contact you soon, but you may not hear from me for a day or two, so don't worry. I can protect myself just fine if I have to. I think you know that. I will see you soon.

Love, Sara

Harry read the note three times, wondering what he should do. It was morning; Sara would have left hours ago. How far could she have gotten since dawn? Was she alright? Questions raced through his head, but there were no answers. All he could do was wait for some word from her.

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He folded the letter and went down for a quick lunch. He had two lawns to mow today, as well as flowers to plant, three trees to prune, mulch to lay, and a garden to weed. Then he had to paint a fence in the afternoon. It was a lot to get done, but he didn't mind as long as he was outside and not with the Dursleys. Plus the extra money allowed him to get some badly needed clothes, so he didn't look so drab next to Sara and Hermione when he went back to school. Most of what he had was being ruined at the market and in the neighbor's yards.

Mr. Spaulding at the office had given him a raise. He'd even gone as far to say that Uncle Vernon had misjudged Harry, criminal or not. He'd called him intelligent and a good, hard worker. Harry had never been so proud of himself, not even after winning the Quidditch cup! Impressing this man, who believed Harry to be of a terrible sort, was nothing short of amazing with his reputation as 'tarnished' as it was. Uncle Vernon was still angry with him for 'making him look bad', but Harry didn't care what he thought anymore. Harry was now a licensed driver, all he had left to accomplish was making as much money as possible so he would never have to see their faces, or endure their constant humiliation, again.

He had socked away a good amount of money so far. All of his office check and all of his pay from the market, minus whatever he spent on food during the week. He had learned quickly how to spend only a small amount of money eating, and bought his dinner at the market between jobs and ate in the break room. He packed his own lunches at home to avoid the deli, as much as he liked it. He was beginning to relax, knowing it would be possible to, over the course of this one summer, save a sum substantial enough to put him at ease.

He wasn't at ease now, though. He thought of Sara all day as he went about his work, and couldn't sleep that night, wondering if she was safe in the dark, wherever she was. He'd sent Hedwig with letters for Ron and Hermione, filling them in and asking if they'd gotten any owls from her. If they did, he asked that they send him a message at once.

Harry had to work in the morning, but he worried long into the night, occasionally imagining he could smell her perfume on the night breeze.

* * *

Three days passed without a word. Not from anyone. Then Hermione called. Dudley had given her the

number at the market, no doubt with the hopes of getting him in trouble, and she'd called him there. She grilled him about having yet another job, and he admitted to only working 'a few nights a week', but Dudley had already told her everything. She seemed concerned, so he said he just needed to stay out of the house. This she accepted, knowing his history with the Dursleys. She said she'd heard from Sara and that she was fine. Harry had bombarded her with rapid-fire questions, but she either wouldn't answer or didn't know. What she'd called for, as it turned out, was to invite him for a weekend with Ron.

They would be picking him up Friday at six, which meant he had to get the night off and hurry home if he had any hopes of showering before they arrived. He'd left a note on the manager's desk and planned to call a taxi from the office that day. He couldn't wait to see them. He'd been so busy he'd barely even written to his friends all summer. What little time he did find usually went to Sara.

* * *

The days crawled by. Every hour at work seemed like a week. The only time that seemed to fly were the few hours Harry spent asleep. He was excited to see Ron and Hermione, but he missed Sara and her letters, always addressed to *Captain*. And he missed writing to her. He no longer had anyone to which he could describe his day, vent his frustrations. Even Hedwig seemed depressed and restless.

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Finally, Friday arrived and Harry suffered through the long, long, day. He found the taxi waiting to take him back to the Dursley's and showered as fast as he could manage. The Dursley's waited curiously at the windows, while Harry was still in his room, packing. He brought most of his new clothes, though he surely wouldn't need them all, and a few other odds and ends. He was glad he'd bought a new backpack, so he wouldn't have to be seen with Dudley's old one, full of holes and stained. He made sure he had his credit card, which Uncle Vernon had advised him to get, (but not use) and enough cash to get him through the weekend.

The doorbell rang and Harry bounded down the stairs, not wanting to subject his friends to Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia, or worse, Dudley.

They beat him to it, getting to the door as he was still half a flight up.

"We're here for Harry." He heard Hermione say. He couldn't see her, though, because the Dursleys were all crowded in the doorway, blocking his view.

"Wow." He heard Dudley whisper, staring out behind his parents. Harry was at his side, trying to squeeze through. Dudley wouldn't budge, he was obviously fascinated and Harry wondered what new beauty spells Hermione might have found.

Aunt Petunia was asking her questions and Hermione was being very polite, more so than usual and Harry was thankful. He wanted the Dursleys to be nice to his friends.

"Hermione!" He yelled through the barricade of shoulders.

"Harry!" She yelled back, "Come out! I've got a surprise for you!"

The Dursleys had to move at this point as they could no longer pretend he wasn't behind them.

"Harry! You've got visitors!" Uncle Vernon said and stepped back at last. Dudley stayed where he was, but Harry squeezed through. And there was Sara, smiling on the step.

Harry dropped his backpack and hugged her. She laughed and clung to him, then pulled away and gave him a quick, discrete kiss. Harry smiled with his entire being and stood looking at her, holding her hand in his.

"Harry," She said, "Uncle Albus let me go."

"That's great!" Harry said, "But how? I mean, I thought you left?"

"I tried to, but Severus intercepted me. He'd arrived during the night. I barely got out the front door."

"So he took you to Dumbledore."

"Yes. And I told him I was leaving with or without his help or permission."

"You really said that? *To him?*"

"I wasn't going back to that room," she said and lowered her eyes. "Something had to change, Harry. I'm missing out on my life."

"I know," he said, "That's what I was trying to explain to him."

She smiled sweetly at him. "He told me you had been sending him owls." Sara was very proper, speaking with the English accent she'd learned from her parents. She was dressed very conservatively in a white dress with a pink rose print, her pretty blond curls pulled back in a ponytail.

"So he let you go?"

"I'm staying with Hermione, but I have to be back by Sunday night. I'll return on the train with Severus."

Uncle Vernon cleared his throat. "Now Harry," he said, "Aren't you going to introduce your friends?"

Harry knew they didn't care who his friends were, they were only curious about Sara.

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"Uh, well, yeah, sure." Harry stammered, "You remember Ron Weasley, of course, and this is Hermione Granger." Ron waved from where he was, and Hermione said it was a pleasure, though her tone was rather dry and her smile forced. "And this is my girlfriend, Sara Lemke."

"*Girlfriend!?*" he heard Dudley whisper from behind his parents.

"It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Dursley," she said and shook hands, "Mr. Dursley."

"Harry?" Ron said and moved in for a closer look, "You really don't look so good, mate. Have you been ill?"

"No."

"You're right, Ron. He does look a little gaunt." Hermione agreed, "You're *thinner*, and Harry, you've

got dark circles under your eyes."

Uncle Vernon answered before Harry could come up with an excuse. "Well, he's been working fourteen hours a day! He leaves just after sun-up and doesn't drag himself in until after midnight. He's a gardener on the weekends. It's almost as if he doesn't even live here!" Uncle Vernon smiled at this last.

"Fourteen hours!" Ron yelled, "Harry! What are you doing?"

"I just wanted to save some money," he explained, "That's all."

Sara touched his arm and whispered. "Harry, I didn't know at what point I should tell you this, but I've got money. You don't have to work. *Ever.*"

"It doesn't matter. I need to have my own, can't you understand?"

"I do understand, Harry." She smiled.

Harry glanced at the ground, and then smiled back.

"Now I want to know what sort of supervision there's going to be on this *trip.*" Uncle Vernon said and turned his gaze deliberately at Harry and Sara's intertwined fingers.

Aunt Petunia put a hand on her hip. "Yes, where will you be staying? And what sort of *sleeping arrangements* are there?"

Sara immediately took a step forward to address their questions. It was clear to her friends she'd taken offense to their insinuations.

"Well, Mr. and Mrs. Dursley, when we arrive in London we'll be staying at The Leaky Cauldron, which is one of *our* places. We have rooms reserved there."

"And where, exactly, is this *Leaky* Whatever?" Uncle Vernon asked as he and his wife tried to stare her down.

"You wouldn't be able to find it, even if we gave you an exact map. You would never see it."

Not wanting to have *that* sort of conversation in view of the neighbors, Aunt Petunia narrowed her eyes at Sara and lowered her voice. "And I suppose you expect us to believe that you'll be sharing a room with the other young lady?"

Sara's tone was growing angry, though she still smiled pleasantly. "Believe it or not, Mrs. Dursley, *magic* doesn't mean *lawless*. Hermione and I *will* be sharing a room, as will Harry and Ron, and Professor Snape, our *chaperone*, will occupy the room between us. Besides, my uncle, Albus Dumbledore, Order of *Merlin* and Headmaster of Hogwarts, who arranged this trip for us, told me Harry was very honorable and that he had the utmost confidence in him. It's a shame you don't seem to share his views."

Harry felt he should say something to get Sara to stop glaring at his Aunt Petunia. The black streak in her hair had faded to one thin lock, but he could already see a few crimson strands sprinkled in, and more appearing every second. He went to her side and put a hand on the small of her back. "Professor Snape hates me," he told his aunt and uncle.

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"*Who wouldn't.*" Aunt Petunia muttered, barely audible.

"Good!" Uncle Vernon chirped, "That's encouraging!"

Ron finally came onto the step and rolled his eyes. "He hates *all* of us, except Sara. He seems quite fond of *her.*"

Harry, Hermione and then Sara burst into laughter.

"I suppose it is rather silly," Ron grinned, "Thinking *Snape* fond of *anyone.*"

"Speaking of Snape," Sara said, "We'd better get going. I'd hate to worry him unnecessarily."

"Hard to imagine," Harry laughed, "Snape *worrying.*"

Ron snickered. "Well, I'll bet he's not very nice if you've made him worry. We probably *should* get on our way."

Harry grabbed his overstuffed backpack off the step and turned around to leave. He stopped after only half a step. "Where did you *get* that? How? *Who's* is it?"

"I rented it," Sara smiled, "It's supposed to be a nice weekend. I thought we'd enjoy having the top down."

Harry smiled wide. It was thrilling enough to be going on a weekend trip with his friends, and that Sara was with them, but they were going in a luxury Mercedes convertible, red, with chrome wheels and leather seats. The sort of car most people dream about, but never really get to experience. He was even more elated when Sara tossed him the keys.

"Are you serious?"

She grinned as she made her way to the passenger door, where Hermione and Ron were already climbing in. "Let's *go*, Harry!"

Harry threw his bag into the boot, which was already jam-packed, and hurried over to help Sara into the car. She gave him another quick hug, and slid into the seat, holding onto his hand. Harry closed the door for her and turned to wave to the Dursleys, who had ventured onto the step. Aunt Petunia didn't wave back, but Uncle Vernon raised a hand. Dudley still appeared awestruck. Harry held up the keys to the car and mouthed the words *thank you* to his Uncle, who smiled and gave a brief nod. Harry actually *liked* the man for a moment.

Harry slid into the driver's seat and started the engine, loving the feel of the expensive leather. He looked at Sara, who smiled at him from the passenger side.

"You know," he said, "This is the first time I've ever seen you in shoes."

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5. The Dark Intruder

"I wanted to stay in a nice hotel, but Snape wouldn't hear of it." Sara said and dropped onto the bed, "So here we are."

"I don't care where we stay." Harry said, "As long as you're with me."

Sara smiled. "You're too sweet Harry, but I feel the same. It doesn't matter."

"Besides," Harry lowered his eyes and studied the bed cover, "The Leaky Cauldron is good enough. And the rooms are cheap, even by wizard standards. I doubt I could afford to pay even a *fourth* of what a muggle hotel would want. Especially a fancy one. Ron, either."

"Harry, this weekend is on me and don't even think of arguing. Like I said, I've got money."

"But it's your *parent's* money. You should save it." Harry implored, "I've got plenty of wizard gold myself, you know."

"Harry," Sara laughed, "My parent's were rich. I've got more money than I could ever spend, so it looks like I'm going to need some help. After all, Hermione and I can only wear so many new clothes."

"Hermione! She let you *buy* her things?"

"Not at first. In fact, she said the same thing you did. She didn't give in until I explained that I hated the money, especially the life insurance, and it only brings me pleasure when I share it with the people I love, the way my Mom and Dad did. It's what money's for, Harry. Bringing *happiness and comfort*. It's what my father always said about it."

He understood her feelings about her parents' life insurance, remembering how he'd given away a thousand galleons for winning the Tri-Wizard Cup, which he'd only gotten because Cedric Diggory, who was to be co-champion, had been murdered. He also recalled his frustration when no one would take it from him and his relief when Fred and George finally did. Harry saw the pain in her eyes and gently caressed the side of her face, softening his words. "Don't forget *security*. You'll be old someday, Sara. One-hundred and twenty according to Dumbledore. You have to be *careful*."

"Have I mentioned that my father was an investment broker on Wall Street? He didn't just *work* in an office, Harry, he *owned* it. There is a fortune at my disposal. Enough to satisfy our every whim for the rest of our lives, within reason, and still be sizable."

"But where did he get it all? Surely not just the stock market?"

"Remember when I read your palm?"

"Of course."

"Gypsies, as you know, are historically great fortune tellers, seers of the future. While we no longer wander the Earth in caravans, the blood is still strong. My father was in a profession where prediction is everything. Obviously, he was rarely wrong."

"Alright, then. You have money." Harry looked to her, a serious expression on his face, "But Sara, I can't have my girlfriend support me. It's wrong. I'll make my *own* fortune, and I'll buy you a house. A *big* house, on the ocean. And I'll put all kinds of spells on it so that no one can ever hurt you while you're there."

"What will it look like?"

"It will be made of stone, like Hogwarts, so it will stand for many years." he said, the smile on his face growing, "And *inside* there'll be lots of rooms for you to wander, *none* of them empty, and hidden passages and vast, underground rooms to keep all our secret treasures."

"Will there be windows in this grand palace?"

"Lots of them! Some so big you can sleep on the sill."

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"Hmmm. And flowers?"

"Millions."

She laughed and threw her arms around his neck, causing him to fall flat on his back. "It sounds absolutely perfect! I think I'll take it, Mr. Potter."

"You're silly." He grinned, pinned to the bed.

"It's because I'm so happy!" She smiled and kissed him, "I'm free, Harry. Your little storybook princess has turned back into a frog."

"Then I should kiss you again." He said, "I would prefer a *princess*. You don't have any *warts*, do you?" He kissed her.

"We only have a moment, Captain. We'll be leaving for Diagon Alley soon."

"I'll get school supplies some other time."

"Well I won't!" She said and playfully shoved him with both hands. He landed on his side with a bounce.

"What do you mean?" He laughed, "You don't need many supplies for tower-dwelling, even if it *is* in a school."

Sara laughed and shook her head in disbelief. "I never told you! How could I *forget*?"

"Forget what?"

"I'm to be normal again, Harry! It was all Snape's idea, actually, so you can thank *him*. I'll be attending school with you in September, posing as an apprentice to Professor Trelawney! Only I can't let on that I'm American." she said with her perfect British accent.

"That's great!" Harry said and gave her his biggest hug yet. "You'll have to teach *Trelawney* a thing or two as well. She can't predict the future any better than I can. But how are we to behave if you're an apprentice and I'm a student? It wouldn't be proper and I doubt Dumbledore would approve-

"Harry, I'm to be a student, too! Uncle Albus and I already thought of that. Trelawney only has so many classes a day; after all it's not the most popular subject, so we'll be taking a potions class

together, as well as Defense Against the Dark Arts. Uncle Albus *insisted* on that. Also, History of Magic."

Harry was so happy, all he could do was kiss her over and over until she softly sighed and pulled him closer.

"Do we still have to wait until September?" Harry whispered, her lips brushing against his neck,

"We're not at school and Dumbledore's the *last* thing on my mind."

"Yes," she resigned, "we still have to wait."

Harry groaned and fell onto his side, holding her hand.

"Hermione and I went to see a doctor yesterday." She smiled, "Just in case we decide to take the next step."

"Are *Hermione and Ron*--"

"No. Like I said, it's just in case. It's not like it's something we can pick up in Hogsmeade."

"But why a prescription? Why not just use magic?"

"Because it's simple. There's no cauldron involved and we don't have to drink anything that tastes bad.

Unless you prefer I continue asking Snape to mix up potions for us?"

"No way."

"That's how I feel about it."

"How long before it works?"

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"Are you getting impatient?"

"Not at all. Well, yes."

Sara laughed, "Me, too."

There was a light knock at the door and Ron popped his head in. "Sorry." He said when he saw them,

"Are we ready to go?"

"We are." Sara smiled.

Hermione appeared at Ron's side, dressed in less conservative clothing than she'd worn to meet the Dursleys. A look of horror came over Sara's face when she saw her. "I forgot to change! I can't walk around Diagon Alley dressed like a *librarian*! I'll just be a minute." She said and hurried around the room, gathering garments, before disappearing into the bathroom.

"Got your list, Harry?" Hermione asked, holding hers up to show him.

"Somewhere." He said and set to rummaging through his backpack.

"Did you like my surprise?"

"Are you kidding? I can't even *describe* how much I liked your surprise!" Harry smiled. "There it is."

He pulled out the list, "I really missed her, Hermione. Thank you."

"What are friends for?" She smiled, "Now let's

* * *

It was Sara's first time in Diagon Alley and she stared in wonder at everything they passed, spent too long in every store. She and Hermione lingered in one establishment neither Ron nor Harry had ever been in before. It was shockingly expensive and the merchandise finely tailored. Robes of silk, velvet, and satin were abundant and the girls ran from one to the next, trying everything on.

Harry and Ron decided to wander around the men's section, even though they had no plans to buy anything and browsed, meandering between racks. Harry's eyes roamed over shelves of impossibly expensive odds and ends. (He had no idea why they were in the men's section, except perhaps as gifts for women.) His eyes lingered on one item and, checking the price, he sighed and moved on.

Ron glanced across the room and shook his head. "I don't know why they're trying on *those* robes; all we need are the ones for school. And they don't even sell them here. We should be at Madam Malkin's. Waste of time if you ask me."

Harry chuckled, "One more fashion accessory, Ron."

Ron smiled. "Who really wears robes now, anyway? Just the old ones, mostly. I mean, we all have them, but you can't exactly *wear them around*."

"*They* could."

"I think you're right, Harry." Ron agreed. "And here they come."

"Sara and I found the most beautiful robes! See? They match our outfits." Hermione grinned, modeling hers.

"Start looking, guys." Sara smiled, "Hermione and I decided we should all be in vogue while we're here. This is a *wizarding* market, you know."

"No sense looking like muggles." Hermione said, "We can do that anytime."

"I'd have to work *all year* to afford one of these!" Ron protested.

"It was my idea, so it's my pleasure, Ron."

"But Sara. You *can't*!"

"Why not? Don't you think it would be a *little* fun to walk around in the finest of wizard's robes? In the middle of London, no less?"

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"Well, yeah, sort of. It's just, well, it's not like you want to buy us a drink, or chocolate frogs!"

Harry put a hand on his friend's arm. "Ron, don't worry about it."

"Well, alright I guess, as long as Harry's going along with it." Ron hesitantly acquiesced.

"Go ahead, then. We'll be back for you." Sara said and led Hermione away.

* * *

When the girls returned, they were laden with heavy packages. Ron and Harry were before the

mirrors, satisfied with the robes they'd found. Ron's was dark blue, Harry's black and green.

"Very nice." Sara said as she inspected them, "Conservative. Distinguished, but not elderly. I love the fabrics. The two of you did well." She smiled at them, and her eyes stopped on Harry. "But there's something missing. Harry, give me yours."

Immediately he slipped it off and handed it to Sara, who walked to the back with it, out of sight. She reappeared a few minutes later and returned the robe.

"There. That's more like it." She said and waited for his reaction. She'd had the tailor sew on a small, gold lightning bolt, just like his scar.

"Cool!" Ron said. "I wish I had a *symbol*."

"You will. It's supposed to appear on the cover of your spell book. Here." She handed Ron, then Harry one of the packages. "I sent Flourish and Blotts an owl a couple weeks ago, asking them to get us these. They come with a binding spell."

Hermione interjected, "When they're used together, they'll perform some special charm or spell, whatever we decide."

"These are great, Sara!" Harry said.

"I liked your idea, Harry. *Ka-tet*. The legends of the future." She grinned.

Harry smiled, pleased but a little embarrassed.

"We'll look at them later." Hermione said, "Come on, there's lots to do yet."

"But it's late! Hermione, it's *dark* outside!" Ron protested and indicated the windows, "School stuff will have to wait until tomorrow. I doubt anything's even open now."

"Who said *anything* about school supplies? I said let's to *do*. They put in a little cafe' since last year. Let's have a potion or two in our flashy new robes. It will give us a chance to look at these." She held up her book, still wrapped in brown paper and tied with string.

"Yeah," Sara said, "Then we'll go back to our rooms, drop this stuff off, change clothes, and go to the club up the street. Anyone feel like dancing?"

"We don't want to keep *Harry* up too late." Hermione said, "He works *fourteen hours a day*, after all. And he *walks* back and forth to work. His cousin told me. I doubt his *feet* could hold up much longer."

"They won't even drop you off?!" Ron said angrily, "*Those people*, Harry, I'm glad they're not *my* relatives."

"I'm okay." Harry lied. He was exhausted, but didn't want to spoil the evening.

Sara studied his face, seeing the dark circles and his tired, weary eyes. "Hermione, Ron, take the car. Go without us." Sara said and took Harry's hand, "We could all use some time to ourselves, anyway. We'll hit the town tomorrow night, when we've got him rested up."

"Are you sure?" Harry asked, "Really, I'll be alright, once I've got my second wind."

"Of course I'm sure. I've missed you Harry." Sara said as they took seats around a table outside the cafe. "Now unwrap your book."

"Mine changed color!" Hermione exclaimed, "It was black, but now it's silver!"

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"Mine, too!" said Ron, who now held a blue book.

"Mine turned purple." Sara laughed, "Of course it did."

Harry looked confused. "Mine's still black." he said and held it out for them to see, "Did I do something wrong?"

"It means yours is the key, Harry." Sara explained, "There will be something special about yours, we just don't know what it is yet."

"You've got all the luck, mate." Ron frowned, "I wish I'd won *that* lottery."

"It means he's the strongest." Hermione told him, "It's no surprise."

Harry said nothing, just looked at the black book, embossed with gold. How could he be stronger than Sara? She was an Elemental and he, well; he spoke parseltongue and had a scar.

"They're not very thick." Ron said, "You should have ordered *two* for Hermione."

"Or three." Harry added.

"No need." Sara said, "When you run out of room, or if you want to add between pages, speak a simple spell and more pages will appear. Make your book as long as you'd like. Now," Sara addressed the three of them, "If you press your palm to the large gold circle on the front, according to the bookseller, the image that represents you will surface."

They all laid on their hands, the gold rearranging itself tickled under their skin. Sara took hers away first.

"What is it?" Hermione asked.

"An old Gypsy symbol my Grandmother taught me. It means Earth, wind, fire, and water. The elements. What did you get, Hermione?"

"It's an owl. I don't get it."

"An owl is a sign of wisdom." Harry said, "I got a lightning bolt, like my scar. Ron?"

"It's a chess piece." Ron said "The knight."

"I always thought you were the sneaky sort." Sara said, "I'll bet it has to do with that chess game you played your first year. Uncle Albus told me about it, about *all* of it." She glanced at Harry and Hermione, smiling. "That's your symbol, then. The knight."

"Cool." he grinned.

"Now," Hermione said, "All we have to do is fill the pages."

"Has anyone noticed," Snape said as he approached the table, having apparated onto the street. "That it has been full dark for *hours*?" He narrowed his eyes at Harry, and then looked to Sara for answers.

"You *found* us, didn't you?" Ron rolled his eyes.

"Now Severus, you know I'm safe with Harry. It's afraid of him."

"Maybe so, maybe *not*. We all know he's been lucky in the past," Snape looked to Harry, who glared back, "but luck has a way of...*running out*."

"Sit down, then." She told him. "And the two of you can stop *glaring* at each other. After all, it's not accomplishing anything, is it?"

Harry didn't drop his eyes until Snape looked back to Sara. "I would be more comfortable knowing where you are after sunset."

Snape walked to the farthest table and sat, facing the street, ignoring them.

"Where were we?" Hermione asked, "Oh yes, the books. Has anyone gotten much done yet?"

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"Not really." Harry said, "I don't have much time, but I've compiled a few things. It's mostly in my head."

"That sounds like me, too." Ron said, "I haven't got much time, either."

"I hate to admit it," Sara said, "But I've got almost fifty pages."

"Fifty!" Hermione said, incredulous, "I'm lucky if I've filled half that! And now I have to copy it all into *this* book. The good news is we have all of next year before we use the binding spell."

"That's right." Sara smiled at Harry and Ron, "We use it the last day of school. So after we get back to Hogwarts, you two, *no more slacking*."

* * *

Sara was asleep when the light knock came at the door and Harry slid gingerly off the bed to answer it. Sara stirred, but didn't wake.

"Who is it?" He whispered.

"I'd like a word with you, Potter." It was Snape.

"It's late." Harry said and rubbed his eyes, "Can't it wait until morning?"

"Do you really think I would I be here if it could?"

Harry eased the door open and slipped into the hall, wearing his pajamas and barefoot. "What is it?"

"Since you appear to be *sleeping* in Sara's room, there's something I thought you should know." Snape said, "A hooded man wearing a black cloak that *seemed to hover* was seen within the hour. He was merely glimpsed, but undoubtedly fits the description Sara gave."

Harry scratched his head, "Gave when?"

"After she awoke to find him standing over her *bed*, of course."

"He *came in*?" Harry asked; surprise on his tired face.

Seeing that this was news to Harry, Snape decided to make him squirm a little. "I understand her screams woke *everyone*, including half of Hogsmeade." Snape said, provoking Harry's concern. "It took the Headmaster *hours* to coerce her out of the closet. She'd hidden herself in there, buried under a pile of clothing."

"Did it hurt her?"

"Of *course* not. Albus came to her rescue on his flying carpet. Unfortunately, he'd been fast asleep."

"It was the night he made her close the doors." Harry said and thought *I was right*.

"You don't mean to say, Potter, that your *girlfriend* didn't tell you any of this?"

Harry said nothing.

"Funny, I was almost fooled into thinking she trusted you."

"She didn't want to worry me." Harry narrowed his tired eyes at Snape, "I was *home* in case you forgot."

"Yes, of course you were." Snape smirked at Harry, knowing how this new knowledge was affecting him. "*Working* I've heard, at a muggle job. Frivolous waste of time, Potter."

"I'm sorry you think so, *Professor*, but I have to make money *somehow*."

"I suppose you do." Snape sneered, "And what a coincidence, the *Headmaster's niece* just happens to be *well off*."

Harry scowled, taking a step closer, "I love Sara. But then what do *you* know about love? *Nobody* loves *you*, except maybe that creep Malfoy."

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Snape stepped in even closer, eliminating the gap between them, his black eyes fixed on Harry, his expression hateful. He was angry, but there was something else in his countenance. Something that was *hurt*. Harry smiled.

Snape spoke through clenched teeth, "You're rather brave lately, *Potter*, you should be more careful with *what you say*."

"I don't like you, *Snape*. And you've never shown *me* any respect, but I have a feeling that, someday, *you will*."

"I wouldn't count on it."

Suddenly a sharp, stabbing pain ripped through Harry's scar, blurring his vision and he gasped, his hands flew to his head. "What is it?" Snape demanded, but before he could answer Sara was screaming. Harry bolted through the door with Snape right behind him. It was dark, but Harry could just make out the cloaked figure, only feet from Sara, its arms raised in a threatening gesture.

"*Sara!*" he yelled and heard its hiss. Snape was suddenly in front of Harry, holding him back with one arm, the other extended a wand. Snape had barely opened his mouth to speak when he found himself propelled backward, almost taking Harry down with him, but Harry only stumbled. Snape landed hard, but was still conscious. He climbed shakily to his feet. Harry never took his eyes off the intruder. He

had no wand and now neither did Snape. Harry hadn't felt so disarmed since battling the basilisk and silently told himself not to panic.

"Harry Potter!" it hissed, it's voice deep and menacing, snake-like.

"What do you want, *Voldemort*?" Harry demanded and glanced at Sara, standing next to the bed, staring at the figure and visibly shaking.

The cloak hissed. "You think *Severus Snape* can protect you from *me*?"

"I don't *need* protection from you. I've proven that, haven't I?"

"You're no longer a boy, Harry. I underestimated you. I'll not make the same mistake again."

"You want whatever it is you think Sara has."

"Yessss. An Elemental. So very rare to find one so... *gifted*. She's the perfect host."

"That's what you think." Harry said and threw his hands out, using magic to push Voldemort backward through the room and out the open windows. Voldemort's cry of surprise diminished into the night until it was gone. Harry glanced at Snape.

"You alright?"

"Like you care." Snape said and wiped a trickle of blood from his forehead.

Harry turned toward the frightened girl who stood shaking and staring at the billowing curtains.

"Sara!" he said and rushed to her and threw his arms around her. She collapsed against him, bursting into tears the moment her head touched his shoulder.

"Harry!" She sobbed, "Harry, he came right to the bed! I woke up and he was *looking* at me!"

"It's okay, Sara, he's gone now." Harry whispered.

"I couldn't *find* you, Harry! I thought you were dead!"

"I'll never leave you again." he promised and looked up at Snape, "Not for *any* reason."

Snape walked to the window and looked out, leaving his back to them. Harry kissed her head and stroked her hair as lightning lit up the night sky.

Sara's voice was a little steadier when she spoke again, though she clung to Harry, drawing comfort from him. "He insisted I attack him. I tried to shove him away, but he was so quick, I was almost forced to use...other means. I *looked* for you, Harry, but you were gone."

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"I'm so sorry, Sara, I was just outside the door. I was talking to Snape."

"He was waiting for you to leave." Sara said, but the thought had already occurred to Harry, who shot a poison glance at Snape's back. "I don't know how he found me so soon. It usually takes *weeks*."

Harry, we've only been here six or seven *hours*."

"I know," Harry said. "Someone must have known we were coming."

* * *

"But who, Harry?" Ron asked, chewing his ham sandwich, "Who would tell You-Know-Who where Sara was?" He swallowed, "After all, no one knew we were coming here except Dumbledore and Snape."

"Exactly." Harry said, "Who else has ties to Voldemort? *Snape* bears his mark. It couldn't be anyone else."

"But we thought that before, Harry." Hermione reasoned, "And we were wrong."

"I can't believe it." Sara said, "It simply can't be Severus. There *are* other possibilities."

"Like what?" Ron asked and bit into his sandwich again.

"We could have been followed." said Sara.

"That's true." Hermione added, "He could have had someone watching Hogwarts. Dumbledore *did* sense something in the forest, after all."

"Sara and Snape took the train into London. It would have been easy to follow them." Ron offered.

"Harry," Sara said, "It might not have been Severus. Best not to jump to conclusions."

"But why didn't he kill Snape when he had the chance? All he did was knock him down! Snape betrayed him, remember, and we all know what happened to the betrayers when Voldemort regained power last time." Harry argued, "It just doesn't make sense."

"Perhaps he was afraid you would try to protect Snape? He fears you, Harry, it's no secret." Hermione said.

"Or maybe he hasn't regained power." Sara told him. "Look, it makes sense. I've encountered him many times and I know he's grown stronger, but he's only a shadow of himself. That's why he wants me. He was trying to get me to display my powers last night. He wants to be sure of what I am. Snape *knows* what I am. Knows it as *fact*. The information couldn't have come from him."

"I still think it was Snape." Harry said, "He's already proven himself a traitor and he's such a *creep* anyway." Harry hesitated. His friends were all staring intently at him, Ron subtly drew a finger across his neck and Hermione cleared her throat and motioned frantically with her eyes. "He's behind me, isn't he?"

"Good guess, *Potter*." Snape said from behind Harry's chair, "Sorry to *interrupt*. As you were saying?"

"I wasn't saying anything that isn't already common knowledge." Harry answered without turning.

"Tell us, Snape, how do *you* think Voldemort found us? His crystal ball? Or maybe you led him here."

"Or maybe you're an *idiot*, Potter." Snape said, "I would protect this girl with my life and have sworn to do so. If you want to blame me, then go ahead, but I'm afraid you would be quite wrong."

"What do you think, Professor?" Hermione asked, "How *did* he find her?"

"I don't know." Snape said, "The Headmaster is looking into it as we speak, but he seems to think we were followed from Hogwarts." he moved to look Harry in the eye, "After all, the simplest explanation tends to be the right one."

"Then why lead me out of the room in the dead of night?" Harry asked, "Except to give Voldemort the opportunity to get to Sara."

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"That was poor judgment. I should have come into the room, but I'm sure you can understand why I would be...uncomfortable with that."

"I don't trust you, *Snape*. I don't know how Voldemort found us, but you're the only one who knew where Sara was *and* has the *Dark Mark* on his arm. I swear, if I find out you put her in danger, *Snape*, I'll kill you."

"People can change, Potter." *Snape* said, all the command gone from his voice. He turned to face the others, "Be alert today, *all* of you. I'll meet you at The Leaky Cauldron at nightfall. *Do not be late.*" *Snape* turned and left without another word.

"Harry. *Really.*" *Hermione* whispered across the table, "Accusing *Snape*? What were you thinking?"

"Harry," *Ron* said, "we don't even know if it was him!"

"There's no evidence of *anything*, Harry, and I think you just hurt his feelings." *Sara* regarded him angrily, "He's right, you know, people *can* change. And I for one think he has. So does Uncle *Albus*. *His* opinion must mean something to you, even if mine doesn't."

Harry pushed his plate away and left the table without responding. In fact, he had no idea what had prompted him to accuse *Snape* of betrayal. He thought perhaps his personal feelings were clouding his judgment, for *Snape* was right. It was most likely that they had been followed. *Hermione* was also right. The last time they thought *Snape* a traitor he had saved Harry's life and thwarted an attempt to steal the Sorcerer's Stone.

Harry found himself in the restaurant's bar and collapsed onto a stool, depressed. Now *Sara* was mad at him, *Ron* and *Hermione* thought he was out of line and *Snape* thought he was an idiot. *Sometimes*, he thought, *it's better to keep your mouth shut*. He ordered the first mixed drink that jumped into his head, rum and Coke, and was asked for his ID. Harry had prepared for this before leaving the Dursley's by charming the appearance of his birthday, and watched as the bartender studied him against his license photo, then handed it back. He had his drink within moments.

He thought over his recent behavior as he sipped it, disliking the taste, and wondered what had prompted him to threaten *Snape*. It was unlike him to be so hostile. His dislike for the man was immense, but he had no intentions of killing him. Even if he *did* turn out to be a traitor. Harry let his head fall into his hand. What was *wrong* with him? He *had* been working a lot, he thought, and he'd missed *Sara* terribly. Seeing the fear and helplessness in her eyes last night, cowering before Voldemort, had been too much. He lashed out at *Snape* because he was angry with himself for not being there at that crucial moment, and needed to assign blame. He'd left her alone and defenseless, asleep, and foolishly shut the door behind him, and for what? To *again* indulge himself in slighting *Snape*? Arguing over nothing? He ordered another drink, strangely calmed by the warm glow in his stomach.

"Wallowing, Potter?" Came a familiar voice from behind his chair.

"Stop doing that, *Severus*, it's rather creepy."

Snape slid onto the stool next to him and for the first time Harry noticed he was wearing muggle clothes and looked pretty normal in them. His expression was softer than usual and Harry let his guard down. He was sorry about what he'd said, but couldn't bring himself to apologize.

Snape ordered a drink and waited for it to arrive before turning his attention back to Harry. "Where are your friends, Potter?"

"Probably finishing lunch." Harry said and tipped his head in the direction of the dining room.

"They're all mad at me for what I said to you."

"You were right last night, Potter, but it still bothers me to know that you believe I would put *Sara* in danger." *Snape* lowered his voice. "I would cut this mark from my arm if I could. There is no potion or spell that can erase it. I made a mistake in my youth that I've paid for a thousand times over and in every aspect of my life. But I have learned that there are more important things than vengeance and anger. That girl you say you love is one of them."

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"I just needed to blame someone for my own mistake." Harry sighed, "I never *asked* you to come in when you came to the door. I didn't want to wake *Sara* and I was so tired that I wasn't thinking. It's my fault, really. Even if you *had* led Voldemort there I should have been ready for it."

"Then we're both to blame. After all, I was the one who promised her Uncle no harm would come to her. It was my responsibility, not yours." *Snape* said, "Now, unless you plan to *kill* me now, I think I'll be on my way."

"I didn't mean it, Professor. I was just angry." Harry tried to smile, "Maybe when we have our duel."

"It's a date, Potter." *Snape* said and left.

Harry paid for his drinks and went to find *Sara* so he could apologize. He'd only taken a few steps when she came into the room, looking mildly frightened.

"You were gone so *long*, Harry. We were getting worried."

"I was talking to *Snape*." Harry explained. "It's all sorted out."

"Good. Look, I know you're worried, Harry, but you have to remember that he's on our side."

"I will. I'm sorry, *Sara*. It's just that after last night, with everything that happened, I came a little unhinged. I don't want anything to happen to you."

Sara smiled, "I know, Captain. Now let's hit the town."

* * *

They spent the majority of the day visiting Buckingham Palace, Kew Gardens, Westminster Abbey, and Tate Modern, where they lingered before the works of Picasso and Dali, among others.

Sara and Hermione had brought dresses with them, but Harry and Ron didn't have a suit, so Sara took them to Harvey Nichols on Knightsbridge. They'd only come for two outfits, but Sara went crazy, picking out tons of clothes for them and the staff could barely keep up. At first Harry and Ron had protested, but seeing the zeal in her eyes, they eventually succumbed to the shopping frenzy. By the time they'd left, they had everything from eveningwear to shorts and sunglasses. They could barely fit it all in the car and even the back seat was crammed with bags and boxes.

Sara rented a hotel room just so they could take a quick swim in the pool, shower, and change clothes. Harry and Ron put on their Versace suits while the girls dressed in the bathroom. Ron admired himself in the mirror and Harry stood next to him, smiling modestly, pleased with his own appearance.

"We look good, Harry." Ron said, turning this way and that, "We look *damn* good. We could feed a small country on what these clothes cost, but *I'm* not complaining."

"I *really* like this tie." Harry said and straightened it a little in the mirror.

"My mother's going to kill me." Ron sighed, "She'll think I robbed a bank."

The girls finally came out of the bathroom, looking exquisite in evening dresses and sandals, their hair perfect.

"Don't move." Ron told them and they stopped where they were, "Let's all just stand here and admire each other." Of course, everyone laughed, including Ron, who obviously felt great in his new clothes.

"You look fabulous." he said, "both of you."

Harry smiled, "Is there a word for 'better than fabulous'?"

"Yes," Sara grinned, "We're all a bunch of hotties. Now let's go. We have to be back in only a couple of hours. Bad enough we had to rush our sightseeing. We're not rushing through dinner, too."

They ate at the world-famous Criterion, under incredible gold ceilings and lush, rich decor. It was a high-society crowd, but they managed to draw smiles and appreciative glances from everyone they passed, shining like diamonds in a sea of sapphires.

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Harry and Ron followed Hermione and Sara, who casually linked arms and quietly conversed as they followed the maitre d.

Ron politely nodded and smiled as they made their way to the table, and spoke to Harry in between.

"Harry," he said, "I never thought this would happen to me. I mean, it's so *nice* to be accepted. No one here knows my family's poor, no one's snickering at worn out hand-me-downs. This is a dream, Harry. It can't be real."

"I know exactly how you feel, Ron. *Believe me*. Look at this place!"

"It's like *The Prince and the Pauper*. They think I'm one of them, but I'm not."

"Sure you are, Ron. It's only a matter of clothes. They're just people after all."

"And *muggles* at that!" Ron grinned.

After being seated and perusing the menu, they ordered mixed drinks and talked as they sipped their cocktails, Sara using her best English accent. She had only a couple of weeks to make it a permanent habit, but still slipped in and out of it all the time. It would take work and constant reminders from her friends if she was to succeed with her facade at Hogwarts.

They enjoyed a five course meal and many drinks before they felt they had to leave. The sun was setting already and none of them wanted to upset Snape again, especially since Voldemort had come after Sara.

Outside they encountered a man with a camera, trying to peddle photographs to the restaurant's patrons. He was dressed shabbily, his clothes full of holes and his shoes nearly falling apart, and he was quickly snubbed by anyone he approached. Sara, however, walked right up to him.

"Could you make six copies?" She asked him, "This is a special night, you see, and it would be nice to have something to remember it by."

"Certainly miss!" the scruffy, thirty-ish man said, "Only I would require payment in advance, I'm so sorry." He looked utterly disappointed, fully expecting her to walk away. Sara instead opened her purse and handed him some bills.

"That should cover your costs." She said, "And if they are of good quality I'll send you a just fee."

The photographer counted the money hastily and his expression was one of shock and disbelief. It was obviously quite a bit more than he'd expected, though he didn't argue. He stuffed the money in his pocket and got out a small pad and a pen. "I'll need an address." He said, "Or if you'd like you could pick them up from me."

Sara smiled. "No, you can mail them." She turned to Harry, "Could he send them to you? Would the Dursley's mind, do you think?"

"I'll make sure I get them." He said and gave the man the address.

"If you would, give me a way to contact you." Sara requested, "If I like your work, we may have future need of a photographer."

The man flipped to another page and scribbled something down. He tore off the sheet and gave it to Sara. "This is where I can be reached." he said, "And any future business would be *greatly* appreciated."

Sara glanced at the paper and slipped it into her purse. "Alright, Mr. Sanders, where would you like us to stand?"

"I'll send what I have and you can choose which you want copies of." He told Sara.

"No." She said and smiled, "Time is a factor. I'll trust you to choose the best one and make copies of

that. Save the negatives as well."
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"Certainly, miss. And thank you. I don't get much business. In fact, they've usually shooed me away by now." he half smiled, looking ashamed.
Sara shook his hand. "It was a pleasure meeting you, sir, and we'll look forward to seeing our pictures. Take care."

He waved in reply.

Regretfully, they piled into the car and headed back to Diagon Alley with the top down. It was a warm, balmy summer night and Harry loved the feel of the wind in his hair, thinking it reminded him of going full speed on his Firebolt, only better.

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6. The Phantom

Snape was waiting in the Leaky Cauldron's pub when the Mercedes pulled up to the curb, just as the sun sank below the horizon. His relief was evident, though he refused to help them carry their purchases. In the end Harry and Ron piled them all inside the door, and then Hermione and Sara levitated them through the lively Saturday night crowd and up the stairs to their rooms.

It was decided that they would go to the clubs of the Soho district, which was only a few minutes away. One in particular was a popular gathering place among the other Hogwarts students, called The Phantom. Supposedly, you could expect to find the place rampant with sixth and seventh years on any given Friday or Saturday night, drinking, dancing, and mingling with the muggles that packed the place. Hermione and Ron had decided not to go the night before and had gone to see a movie instead. They didn't want to be hung-over alone.

They were already a little giddy from their after-dinner drinks and spent over an hour changing clothes. The night was still early, so they joined Snape in the pub before heading out. Snape, of course, had to tag along, and made it clear he was none too happy about it.

"I don't understand why you can't just get inebriated right here, if that's what you feel you must do."

Snape said, "If it were up to me I'd put a stop to all this drinking nonsense, but I have my instructions."

"That's right," Sara smiled, "Perhaps if you'd only lighten up a bit, you might enjoy yourself, but you certainly won't with that attitude."

"Enjoy myself?" Snape's face soured, "Hanging around with Potter, Weasley, and Miss Know-it-all? I find that unlikely."

"Hey!" Hermione said, "I don't go around insulting *you*, do I?"

"Yeah," Ron chimed in, "What the bloody hell's the matter with you? Every time we try to be nice to you, you act like...well, like a *creep*. And don't insult Hermione. She stuck up for you this morning, you know."

"I meant it in the *nicest* possible way, of course." Snape smirked. He finished off his drink and pushed the glass away. "Well, that does it for me." he said, "Sara, if your *bodyguard* plans to be drinking all night, then I'll have to decline, sorry as I am to miss out on all the fun, but *someone* has to look out for you. Obviously Potter's not the man for the job."

Harry rolled his eyes, irritated, "Yeah? Which one of us was on the *floor* last night, Snape?"

"Alright, don't start this again!" Sara said, "I've just about had it with your constant bickering." she looked from Harry to Snape, "Severus, the invitation stands. Take it or leave it. And no more insults. This is supposed to be fun for *all* of us."

"I keep forgetting." He said dryly.

"Let's go then." Hermione said and stood.

"Yeah," Ron said, "If we sit here much longer *I'm* going to start arguing with him. I swear, he doesn't know when to *stop*." He walked Hermione to the door, where they turned to wait for the others.

"Come on, Harry. Don't let him bother you."

"He's not riding with us, is he?" Harry whispered to Sara. "I'm not sitting next to him."

"Don't worry, Potter." Snape smiled, "I'll meet you there. And don't even dream of *losing me*. Not if you want Sara to leave the castle again."

"Well, there goes plan A." Ron said and Hermione snickered behind her hand.

"Severus," Sara said and turned to him, leaving Harry to join Hermione and Ron at the door, "You'll need muggle money to get in. Here." she gave him a wad of bills. "We'll meet you at the entrance to The Phantom."

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"Be careful, my dear." Snape told her, taking the money from her hand, "I'll be waiting when you arrive. However, if I'm not right outside the door, *do not go inside*."

"I understand." She said. Snape smiled affectionately and his hand lit briefly on her shoulder.

"Do you see the way he looks at her?" Ron whispered, "He *adores* her. It's sickening, don't you think?"

Harry only nodded slightly, trying not to laugh, for he had been thinking along similar lines. Snape practically doted on Sara, he had never heard him insult her or cut her down the way he did most others and he always smiled in her presence. *It's because of her mother*. Harry thought.

"You'd think her name was Sara *Malfoy*." Hermione grinned, keeping her voice low. She looked to the bar and spoke up, "Come on, Sara. Let *Mr. Personality* find his own way in."

"Coming!" Sara said and joined them at the door. Ron held it for them and they filed out, and then piled into the car, the girls sitting in the back.

It wasn't far to The Phantom, but the traffic was heavy and it took longer than expected. Snape stood

on the sidewalk, wringing his hands and glancing around nervously, his worry evident as they approached unseen. His whole body seemed to relax when he finally spotted Sara, sprinting across the busy street, holding Harry's hand and mirrored by Ron and Hermione. They met on the sidewalk. "Ready?" Sara asked, as frenzied music spilled out of the club, bass thumping under a catchy rhythm. Dozens of young people lingered about, loitering or waiting to get inside. Two overstuffed men stood just outside the open door, one checking ID, the other simply alert and leaning against a bar stool. Just inside they could see a third man taking money behind a window while a fourth stamped each person's right hand.

"Is this *really* necessary?" Snape asked, glancing around.

"Yes." All four of them answered in unison. Harry led Sara to the end of the line and everyone else followed.

* * *

Three hours later Harry relaxed against the bar, watching Hermione and Sara dance amidst a thick crowd of people. Ron had run into some friends of his brothers' and was off talking to them. Snape was on the upper level, watching over the railing that overlooked the dance floor. And Harry was in charge of getting the girls more drinks.

Sara and Hermione were on the outer edge of the dancing crowd and Harry noticed they drew more attention than any of the other girls nearby, turning practically every head that passed. He understood why. They were gorgeous, there was no doubt about that, and they were so *polished*, yet natural. Their hair, so long and shiny, was perfectly straight tonight and caught the colored lights that flashed from above. Sara's black streak was as minimal as it had been since Harry had known her and it seemed deliberate, a part of her attire. And their *clothes* were fantastic. Alluring, provocative, yet classy, making the girls around them look like they were trying too hard. Sara's skin had a sheen like silk and as Harry watched her dance, he wanted to touch her, run his fingers over every inch of it.

"Hey, kid," Harry heard and felt an elbow jab his shoulder, "Who d'ya think that blond would go for? Me or my buddy Steve?" Asked a heavily muscled guy, standing with two friends of similar physique. (Steve cocked an eyebrow at him.) They were all in their twenties, Harry guessed, and they were *big*. Harry was nearly six feet tall, but these guys made him feel puny. He turned his attention to them anyway. After all, he had his wand in his sock.

He turned his eyes back to Sara, lingered on her, and then faced them again. He chuckled.

"Something funny, Scarface?" The one in the red shirt asked, his accent American, his expression more amused than angry as he sized Harry up.

"Nothing," Harry replied. "It's just that I don't think she'll be going home with either one of you."

"Is that so?" Asked the red shirt, "And what makes *you* so sure?" He and his friends laughed.

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"Maybe she'd rather go home with me?" Harry challenged.

Red shirt grinned, "Sorry little buddy, but girls like *that* don't go for wimpy little four-eyed geeks. You might better try over there." He indicated a group of homely, pimple faced girls dancing together on the outskirts. "You hear this, Steve?" Red Shirt laughed, "Gilligan here thinks the blonde's going home with *him*!" All three of them burst out laughing.

"We'll see," Harry smiled, "Here they come."

"I can't wait to see Nerd Boy here get shot down," Red told his friends, who snickered.

"I'll get them a couple of drinks," Steve announced and turned to summon the bartender.

"I already have," Harry told them. They looked stumped for a moment, and then turned all their attention to the two girls coming toward them. Harry caught Sara's eye and put a finger to his lips. He tipped his head at the three gorillas, who looked ready to pounce and she understood at once. She whispered to Hermione. Sara smiled and reclined against the bar between Harry and the group next to him.

"Would you like a drink?" Harry asked the girls.

"Sure!" They answered and Harry handed them glasses. He let his eyes linger on Sara, thinking her little black skirt just might drive him crazy.

"You're beautiful," Harry smiled and the guys burst into a fit of laughter. *Amateur* one of them snickered.

"Thank you," Sara said and turned away from the others to put all her focus on Harry. "You're rather beautiful yourself. I have an affinity for green eyes, you know." She smiled. "What's your name?"

"Eugene," Harry replied, somehow with a straight face. "I'm studying to be a scientist. Are you good at math, too? Because that would be really cool."

Sara bit her lip to keep from laughing and Hermione had to turn away. Finally, after a long pause, Sara smiled at him. "You know, I'm having some trouble with math lately. I was looking to find a tutor for summer holiday. How would you like to lend me a hand?" She moved a little closer. "*Or two*."

Now it was Harry's turn to bite his lip. "Ok, but we have to do it at your house because I'm not allowed to have friends over after six."

"I'll send a car to pick you up then. I live alone, so we'll be undisturbed."

"Good, because math takes concentration."

"You must have an *enormous* talent," Sara grinned.

Harry nearly choked on his laughter, faked a sudden cough, and was again stone faced when he looked back at her. "You don't have a dog do you? Because I'm allergic to dogs."

Sara sipped her drink to hide her smile.

Hermione grinned, seeing the rather primitive looking trio was extremely interested in the exchange.

The third, previously silent one tapped her shoulder as she sipped her drink and she half turned.

"Hi," he said, trying to appear suave, "I'm Jim."

"That's wonderful." Hermione said matter-of-factly and put her back to him again. He retreated, looking rather wounded. Harry had to swallow a laugh.

Suddenly Red Shirt put an arm around Sara and turned her away from Harry. She went along with it and Harry could tell she was quite amused. "I've been admiring you for a half hour." Red said, "I would have bought you a drink if little Scarface here hadn't beaten me to it."

"Scarface?" Sara asked quizzically.

"Yeah. He thinks you're gonna go home with him! I had to break the news that girls like you prefer real men, like me."

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"Do they?" Sara turned back to Harry and appeared to consider him. She was bordering on drunk, he realized, and enjoying this little game they were playing. "I don't know. He's cute."

"Cute? My dog is cute." Red snorted, "He's a geek! And I don't think he's worked out a day in his life. Look at his little chicken arms!"

"Chickens don't have arms." Hermione informed them and promptly went to get Ron in case a fight broke out.

"I think he's sexy." Sara smiled at Harry and ran sensual fingers through his hair. "I simply love a guy that wears glasses. He looks smart, don't you think? And distinguished." She hooked the heel of her shoe on Harry's stool, her knee brushing his thigh. He ran a hand over her leg and slipped it just under the hem of her short skirt. Her smile was seductive and Harry was melting. "Would you like to take me home?" She asked as the three apes looked on in astonishment.

"Maybe." Harry answered. "As long as you don't have a dog. And I'll have to see how much gas I have."

"You don't sound very sure. Perhaps I could persuade you." She kissed him tastefully, lingering and light, feeling their jealous eyes on her.

"Do you want to now?"

"I really shouldn't. I have to get up early for church and then right after there's this seminar on the African honey bee at 12:30..." He said, pretending to be indecisive.

Sara pulled him closer, her hand on the back of his head, and kissed him again, intensely, deeper than the first. He responded, wrapping an arm around her waist, spilling his drink a little in his other hand. Warmth invaded him like a flood and he couldn't wait to get her back to their room. It seemed to go on forever, but finally, she pulled away. "How about now?" she asked, a little breathless.

Harry felt weak in the knees and was glad of his barstool. He didn't think he could stand. "Alright," he said, "As long as you don't have feather pillows. I'll break out and I left my inhaler at the Rectory..."

"What the hell?" Red protested, "You can't be serious!"

Sara grinned, "Those girls look like they could use some company." She indicated the same ugly group, "Good luck, gentlemen. You'll need it." Sara smirked and grabbed Harry's hand, pulling him to his feet. "Come on, Scarface. Let's get out of here."

"Your loss." Red snorted.

She and Harry laughed like crazy and stumbled away to find Hermione and Ron.

"You're brilliant, Harry." Sara smiled when they were out of view. "What creeps!"

"I'll bet they're still trying to figure out what just happened. They were so certain, after all."

"Well they were wrong, Harry. I only want to go home with you. And the sooner the better."

"My thoughts exactly." Harry said and kissed her again. "Sooner the better." His arm went around her waist and he pulled her close, so tuned in to her that he almost forgot to keep a grip on his glass. He felt it slip, but caught it, slopping it all over his hand. She kissed him back, forgetting the multitude around them. Forgetting Snape, who scowled with disgust from his overhead vantage point.

"Just being near you is driving me crazy." She whispered, "I thought I wanted to before, Harry, but it was nothing like the way I feel right now."

"Perhaps we won't make it to September, after all." he mumbled as he kissed her neck, "You look so incredible, tonight, Sara, it's hard to keep my hands off you."

"I could say the same about you, Captain." Sara pulled away, smiling her seductive smile. "Let's get out of here. I'm going upstairs to get Severus. You go find Ron and Hermione." She saw Harry was about to protest, "Don't worry. Meet us by the door."

"Alright." He said hesitantly, "But go straight to Snape."

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"I will." She gave him another kiss and walked away. Harry watched until she was climbing the stairs before setting out to find the rest of their group.

Harry had gone no more than a few feet when he found them, dancing with a bunch of rowdy strangers, still holding their empty drinks. Harry drained his and left the glass on a little table close to hand. The music was thunderous over the dance floor, and they appeared to be having a very good time, but he managed to drag them away.

He headed for the door, where they were to meet Sara and Snape, but stopped, apprehension gripping him. Harry knew he should wait by the exit, like she'd asked, but led Hermione and Ron up the stairs, winding their way through a bottleneck of merging people, pushing and shoving when necessary. His need to find her was mounting. His scar didn't hurt, but he sensed there was trouble. He could feel it. They made it through the worst of the traffic and into the less crowded area beyond. There was Sara, once again backed into a corner, furious, but visibly frightened.

"Malfoy." Harry muttered and rushed forward. He grabbed Draco by his collar and yanked him backward. Sara tried to run to Ron and Hermione, but Malfoy was quick and managed to stop her.

"I'm warning you, Malfoy." Harry seethed.

He kept hold of Sara's wrist so she couldn't run and turned to face Harry. "Warning me? And what are you going to do, Potter? I *know* this girl. We're just talking."

"She doesn't want to talk to *you*." Harry said.

"Oh yeah? And what do you know about it, *Potter*?" Malfoy gave a hard tug on Sara's arm and she stumbled toward him. He caught her and wrapped his arms around her so she couldn't get away.

"Friend of *yours*, is she?"

Ron stepped up to Harry. "*Do something!*" he said, "Or I will!"

Harry spoke through clenched teeth, "Get your hands off her *now!*"

"I don't think so." Draco said and kissed her cheek just to spite him. Sara turned her face away and struggled unsuccessfully. Harry shook with rage. He grabbed Sara and pulled her free. She ran to Hermione and Ron stepped in front of the two girls. Malfoy smirked.

"Touch her again...." Harry said and quite suddenly his arm was cutting the air and his fist connected with Malfoy's nose. The smile fell off his face and he crashed to the floor, blood spilling over his mouth, dripping from his chin. Malfoy looked stunned, but more than that, Harry thought he looked scared.

"*What is going on here?*" All heads turned and there was Snape, now only a few feet from Malfoy, his question directed at Harry, who regarded his own hand, blood smeared and already swelling, as if it were foreign. He let it drop to his side.

"He assaulted Sara again, sir."

Snape glanced at Sara, who stood shaking with Hermione's arms around her and Ron fuming nearby. He looked back to Harry. "Why did you not come for me?"

"I handled it."

"How chivalrous. And *barbaric*." Snape scowled, he turned to Malfoy, who was still on the floor, bleeding and cradling his nose. "Get up, Draco. You deserved that one."

Malfoy climbed to his feet and glared at Snape. "You're sticking up for *Potter*?" He yelled from behind his hand. "*Really*, Professor! He broke my nose! And for no good reason!"

"He *had* good reason. He was defending the girl you were harassing. I do have eyes, Mr. Malfoy. You *will not* bother her again or you will deal with *me*."

"Who is she?" Malfoy demanded, "I know her, but I just can't *remember*."

"She's Harry's girlfriend!" Ron loudly interjected.

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"An apprentice. To Professor Trelawney." Snape muttered, "Now come. I can stop the bleeding. Potter? Take the others and meet me outside."

Malfoy looked back as Snape led him to the men's room, "You'll pay for this, *Potter*. I swear you will."

Harry glared murderously until Malfoy was gone. Then he looked to Sara, who still clung to Hermione. "Are you alright?" He asked.

"Yes." She said and hugged him, "I'm *glad* you hit him, Harry. He scares me. I couldn't use magic. I didn't know what to do, he's so much *bigger* than me."

"I've wanted to do that for *years*." Ron said. "Good job, Harry. But do you mind if Hermione and I stay awhile longer? It's not far. We can walk back."

"And if we can't walk," Hermione grinned, swaying on her feet, "We'll take a cab."

"See you in the morning," Sara grinned, "But I think Harry and I may be sleeping in."

"You won't be the only ones!" Ron smiled, "We'll be having *brunch*, I think."

"Or *lunch*." Harry laughed. "Hermione, keep him out of trouble."

"I can't make any promises, Harry. See you later!" and with that Ron and Hermione disappeared back into the throng of people.

"We'd better get outside." Harry said and led Sara back down the stairs, "I'll bet Snape *really* hates me now. Malfoy's his pride and joy, after all."

"So am I." Sara grinned, "At least according to all of you."

Sara stopped to inhale a breath of fresh air as soon as they stepped onto the sidewalk. Then she bummed a cigarette from a strange-looking leather clad man with side-swept purple-tipped hair who was waiting on line. He offered her a light and she thanked him.

"I didn't know you smoked." Harry said, rather surprised.

"I don't. Not really." Sara explained, "Want to try?" She offered the burning cigarette.

"I think I'll pass."

"Good boy," she said, "filthy habit."

Harry laughed. "I wish Snape would *hurry up*. To hell with Malfoy, let him bleed." he grabbed Sara around the middle, "besides, I told your three friends I was going to take you home, after all. I'd hate to let them down."

Laughing, they realized they were drawing attention so they moved away from the entrance and leaned against the front of the building.

"I can't wait to get you all alone." She whispered and kissed him, "I'm so tired of waiting and I still have that potion," she kissed him again, "let's just get it over with."

"Good idea." he kissed her back, "let's go *find* him."

"Do you know what else is a good idea? Tequila. Snape's taking all night."

She led Harry back into the club, stopping to ask the bouncer to give the 'ugly, black haired, old guy' a message that they would be right back.

The closest bar wasn't far from the door. Sara ordered four tequila shots and gave two of them to Harry. He looked confusedly at the condiments, so she demonstrated.

"Lick your hand here by your thumb and salt it. Pick up the lemon in that hand and the glass in the other. Okay, real quick just lick, drink, lemon. Ready, set, go."

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Snape's face turned stern when they emerged from the club for the second time. They were in even worse shape than before and Snape was in a foul mood.

"I told you to *wait here!*"

"We just wanted *tequila*." Sara defended, her words coming out a little slurred. "You're such a spoilsport, Severus. *That's it*. I'm never taking you out again!" she erupted with drunken giggles.

Snape rolled his eyes. "Pity. I was enjoying myself so. I could barely handle all the *fun*. I see *you're* positively pickled."

Harry was stumbling, trying to hold Sara up, "Do you know how to drive a car, Professor?"

"*Of course* I know how to drive a car, you...oh, *come on*." Snape took two steps, and then stopped, "on second thought, wait here. Give me the keys. And *do not* go back into that place for *any* reason. Just wait."

Harry laughed, "But what if Voldemort shows up and kills us while you're gone?"

"Then I'd say it was the perfect end to the evening." Snape said in his usual bored-but-annoyed tone,

"The car's right there, Potter. *I can still see you*." He crossed the street, shaking his head and muttering to himself.

Sara and Harry sat down on the curb and made fun of Snape, laughing hysterically until the car pulled up. They struggled to their feet, falling back down several times while trying to help each other up, and then toppled into the back seat. Snape pulled away at once and drove half a block before he spoke to them.

"Could you stop that? It's disgusting." He glanced at them in the mirror, kissing each other madly,

"There's no *roof* on this forsaken contraption! Everyone can see you."

Sara leaned over the seat, threw her arms around Snape's neck and kissed his cheek.

"I don't want any of Potter's germs, thank you."

"Oh, shut-up, Severus. Weren't you ever young?"

"Never."

She lowered her voice, "Weren't you ever *in love?*"

"You reek of liquor."

"You're no fun, Sevvie." She tousled his hair and collapsed back onto the seat. They had arrived at The Leaky Cauldron.

* * *

Harry locked the door and placed a few spells on it to ensure they wouldn't be disturbed. Sara was unbuttoning his shirt, swaying on her feet as Harry kicked off his shoes. "Come on, Captain. To hell with the door." She said and kissed him again, pulling his shirt from one arm and then the other, dropping it to the floor. Harry tossed his wand into the nearest chair and guided her across the room in the dark, kissing her, stumbling a little. He fumbled with her clothing.

They fell to the bed amidst a madness unfamiliar, all inhibitions forgotten. The uncertainty that accompanied their innocence was snuffed out like a match and their hands knew a boldness they'd never experienced in the past. They maneuvered around on the bed, twisting and rolling from side to side with one general focus, to get out of their clothes without interrupting their passionate kiss. Sara managed to remove most of Harry's clothes, but Harry's job proved incredibly difficult. Women's garments were complex, he learned, and eventually all but gave up.

"*That's it*." He whispered, trying to catch his breath, "It's impossible. I'm getting my wand."

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Sara laughed a little and sat up. "I'll give you a hand. I need a break anyway, Harry. I'm a little dizzy. I'll be alright in a minute." She swung her feet over the side of the bed and tried to get undressed, but Harry stopped her when he saw she was having difficulty. With her back to him he understood the workings of her top and helped her out of it. He unzipped her skirt, and then pulled her nightgown over her head, having found it at the foot of the bed.

"Lay down, Sara. I'll get you some water." He helped her onto the pillow, then gently removed her skirt and tossed it to the floor. Her face had gone pale, he noticed, and her eyes unfocused. "I think you just drank too much." He said and lovingly brushed her hair from her face before stumbling to the bathroom in his shorts.

He found a glass near the sink and ran the water until it was ice cold. Glancing at himself in the mirror he noticed his own face was a little colorless, his eyes reddened and droopy. He looked away, not entirely liking his appearance. When the glass was mostly full he shut off the tap and returned to the bedside, only to find his drunken beloved fast asleep.

Harry got into bed, terribly unsteady on his feet, and drank the water. He was disappointed, that was for sure, but also a little relieved. Dumbledore's warning had been flashing through his head all night, though he'd done his best to ignore the wise inner voice. *Be careful with spirits, Harry. They cloud your judgment and lead to foolish behavior. There are few things worse than regret.* Harry doubted there would have been regrets, but tonight had been all about their immense physical attraction and less about their love for each other. He knew, even in his present state, that he wanted it to be more

than a frantic moment, half remembered in the morning. He was willing to wait a little longer for it. He put out the candle and curled up next to Sara, drifting off to sleep.

* * *

Harry was standing in the middle of the room, the cool night air drifted in through the open windows, chilling his skin. The sky was clear and full of stars and the street below obscured by fog. Something was wrong. Feeling frightened, he turned over in his sleep, his arm coming to rest atop his scar.

Harry looked down at his feet to see the dense London mist rolling across the floor and reached for his wand, but it wasn't there. He wasn't dressed. He looked around the room for his clothes, but couldn't remember where he'd put them. Helplessness and fear invaded him as he came to realize there was something in the room with him, something menacing in the darkness, and it meant him harm.

Harry ran to the door and pulled. It was incredibly heavy and he could feel the presence right behind him, but the more effort he put forth seemed to amplify his struggle. Finally, he wedged it open enough to slip through, but instead of the corridor upstairs in the Leaky Cauldron, he found himself in Sara's tower bedroom at Hogwarts. There was music playing, the melancholy blues song her mother sang, the one he loved so much. Normally, the soothing rhythm calmed and relaxed him, but it drove a spike into his forehead as he made his way into the room. The doors to the roof were open, fog rolled across the floor. The fire was out and the room was cold. Sara was asleep in the dark and he hurried toward the doors, as the room seemed immensely expanded, both Sara's bed and the roof impossibly far away. Something passed through the open door, something black and weightless in the mist. A shadow, slipping along the wall and Sara lay unaware.

"Sara!" he yelled. "Sara! Wake up!" His words fell flat, heavy as lead, as the music grew louder and the voice he heard was minute and hoarse, barely audible, even to him. He ran faster, but felt as if he were underwater, his legs like rubber, his muscles useless. "HELP!" He yelled, just as the shadow lifted an old fashioned black revolver and fired. Paralyzed by fear, the bullet tore open his forehead, piercing his brain and the pain was unbearable. Harry felt himself falling backward, and sat up in bed. His hands flew to his scar.

He was disoriented, and the terror of his dream clung to him, his scar still burning as if the bullet was real. Harry turned his throbbing head toward Sara, asleep in the bed next to him and heard a hiss he remembered well.

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His wand, he recalled, was tossed absentmindedly on a chair near the door where he couldn't get to it. In the blackness he saw shadowy movement near the other side of the bed, closest to Sara. Harry pushed the remnants of heavy sleep from his mind and jumped to his feet atop the bed. He leapt over her and to the floor with a loud thud, placing himself between Sara and the dark shadow. He felt quite useless without his wand, but pointed his finger, speaking the impediment curse he'd learned for the Tri-Wizard Tournament and the movement all but stopped. Knowing he had to act quickly, Harry turned his hand in the direction of his wand and used a summoning charm, breathing a sigh of relief when he felt it in his hand.

Harry heard a furious hiss and Snape was banging on the door and yelling to be let in. Harry needed help, but couldn't turn away, even for one little *alohamora*. His brain was fuzzy from drinking and he couldn't think. Only the simplest spells he'd learned in his first years were coming to him and he felt panic at the edges of his mind, threatening to overcome him. He'd surprised Voldemort, but stupid childish spells were no solution at all. Either one of them could throw them off with little more than a shrug. He needed something stronger, something *clever*.

"Don't you ever give up?" He growled at the cloak, stalling for time with his mind racing and Snape throwing himself at the magically sealed door. *That was stupid.* Harry thought.

He heard a harsh whisper no more than two feet away. *"Never."*

An idea clicked in Harry's brain and he jumped on it, even if it was more first-year magic. He hit Voldemort with a shrinking spell that reduced him to the size of a puppet, but it wasn't enough.

"Patrificus totalis!" the cloak stiffened and collapsed to the floor, rigid as stone. Harry turned his wand quickly to the door. *"Alohamora!"*

Snape fell into the room, wand in hand.

"Light the candles!" Harry ordered.

Snape waved his wand and the room jumped alight as Harry placed a freezing spell on the little cloak, turning it to a block of ice and was about to try everything else he could think of when Snape's hand fell heavily on his shoulder.

"He's gone, Potter."

"What?" Harry blinked, "He can't be! I paralyzed him!"

"Tell me, does your scar hurt?"

Harry sighed. "No. No, it's stopped."

"Is Sara alright?" Snape wondered.

"She's fine. She never even woke up."

"Good. Then she doesn't need to know, does she?"

"No. I guess not. It would only scare her."

"Alright then close that *blasted window* and go back to sleep. He'll not come back tonight. I'll make sure of *that*." Snape took the little miniature cloak and turned to leave. Not having noticed upon his hasty entrance, he now came to a halt and considered all the clothing scattered haphazardly across the floor. He looked accusingly at Harry.

"Don't jump to conclusions." Harry warned, "Nothing happened."

"I should hope not." Snape growled and took to walking again. He got to the door before Harry stopped him.

"Professor?" he said, "Can't I return to Hogwarts with Sara? He's sure to come for her again."

"I fear for her safety as well, Potter, but that decision is not mine to make. The Headmaster can protect her; I can assure you of that. Besides, what about your *muggle job*? You *do* need money, after all."

Snape grinned, remembering the conversation.

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"I have my priorities."

"I'll speak to Professor Dumbledore, I suppose I could do that, but if I were you I'd expect to be arriving on the train with the rest of the students in September." He shut the door before Harry could try to reason.

Harry locked the windows with a few spells and climbed back into bed. Curling up next to Sara, he wrapped an arm around her and closed his heavy eyes, listening to her slow, steady breaths. She never moved.

* * *

Harry awoke to a heavy head, a sour stomach, and an all over ache that made his previous hangover seem like a pleasant memory. He laid still for a few minutes, Sara asleep next to him, trying to think of a pain banishing charm he could cast on himself, but he came up empty. His intense thirst finally drove him out of bed, careful not to wake Sara.

It was late morning and he seemed to be the only one of his group that was awake. He pressed an ear to Ron and Hermione's door and heard Ron's familiar soft snores. Harry backtracked to Snape's room and lightly knocked. "Professor?" he called in a loud whisper.

Snape opened the door, still dressed in his clothes from last night, wearing a baseball-style cap. Harry would have laughed if he didn't feel like death. "What is it?"

"Do you have any aspirin?"

To Harry's surprise, Snape grinned. It was unusual Harry thought, until he realized it was his misery that Snape found amusing. Harry frowned, but waited for an answer.

"I *should* let you suffer, Potter. However, Sara will be rather disappointed if her last day of freedom is spent *inside*, so I have prepared a potion for you and your degenerate friends. Come in."

"Was there any more trouble last night?"

"None. Lucky you weren't killed in your condition and Sara as well. In fact, I'm surprised you woke at all."

"Hmm." Harry said, "Do you really think I could *sleep* with *him* lurking about? In the room, no less?"

You underestimate me, Snape, but for now be nice to me. I feel like hell."

Snape's smile returned. "Drink this. It should help. Either that or all your hair will fall out. It was late; I can't remember *what* I threw in that potion."

Snape meant to terrorize him, but he drank the nasty stuff down at once. Harry didn't care if he was bald, as long as he felt better. It was working before he finished the cup and he could feel it making its way through him like a comfortable glow.

"I'll leave a note for Sara to come see you. I'm going out for awhile. I have to get her a birthday present before we go back to school. I saw it on Friday in Diagon Alley."

"Very well, then. Take some and leave it by the bed. I'll be getting some sleep before we return. Leave this outside Weasley's door." He handed Harry a large vial, "Now go away, Potter."

"Thank you, Professor." Harry said and closed the door behind him.

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Sara's birthday was only a couple of days into the semester and Harry had seen the perfect thing. It was expensive, though, and he had to make a trip to Gringott's Bank before going back to the store where they'd bought their robes, name unremembered. Harry had worn his new robe this morning, partly because Sara had bought it for him, partly because he didn't know when he would get to wear it again except after graduation, but mostly because he wanted to look like he could *afford* to shop in that store. He could; of course, he had a ton of galleons, and didn't mind spending them on Sara. He wanted to get her the nicest things, which is a lot of the reason why he had worked so hard this summer, but he cared more about the muggle money. He doubted he would have parted with so much of *that*.

As he stood in the men's section of the shop, regarding what he'd come for, an idea came to him. Sara's father had made millions investing in the stock market. Why couldn't *he*? He *did* have a seer at his disposal who could make the required predictions, after all. He could multiply the comfortable sum he had in the bank and speed the purchase of their house by several years. But was it dishonest? It certainly seemed so. He wanted to make his money, not steal it. Did that make Sara's father a thief? Harry wouldn't think of it. Whatever her father had done was irrelevant now. He sounded like a great guy. He'd shared his money with others, according to Sara, to *bring happiness and comfort*, and it had left Sara well taken care of. Whatever her father had done, Harry was glad he'd done it, honest or not. He decided against the idea. If he was going to do that, then why not use the wealth that Sara offered? It was the same thing, spending money he hadn't earned. After graduation he would get them a flat in London and he would get a more respectable, better paying job, buy some land, and save money to build the house they would someday call home.

He had stood before the shelf so long that a saleswoman had come to ask if he needed help.

"I'm interested in buying this." Harry told her, "What can you tell me about it?"

"Is it for you?"

"A gift." He answered, "She's a powerful clairvoyant."

"Then this would be the perfect thing. The origin of this particular crystal ball is unknown, but it is *many* centuries old. This is the original stand and, as you can see, the craftsmanship is rather astounding. A lot of work went into this. I'm not sure when it made it's way to England, but I was told by the appraiser that it is full of strong magic that has been lost to our kind for at least a millennium. He wasn't sure of all it could do, but said it was very powerful."

"What are these strange markings here along the base?" Harry thought one of them looked familiar, but what did he know about strange old markings?

"I honestly don't know. Our appraiser thought they might be ancient Romanian symbols."

"I'll take it."

"Very good. A gift you said?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll wrap it for you as well." Harry followed her to the counter, "You know, Mr. Potter, a true clairvoyant rarely gets to use a medium as powerful as *this*. Your lady-friend will be most pleased." Harry smoothed his hair down over his scar, having been recognized by it yet again. "I hope you're right."

* * *

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With the heavy parcel in his arms, Harry entered the room he shared with Sara and found the cup of potion empty and a clamor emanating from behind the bathroom door. He hid the gift in his backpack, magically condensing its contents to make room. He threw his robe over the back of a chair and dressed for lunch. They had precious few hours left together, but thankfully, the new semester started in about two weeks. He wouldn't have to miss her for long, and this time when she returned to Hogwarts, he wouldn't have to concern himself with her sanity. Her safety, however, was another matter. He could only hope Snape had spoken to Dumbledore and that he had agreed to let him accompany them back to the school. His hopes were low. He had a feeling what Snape had said was right. He'd be returning with the other students on the first.

Sara finally emerged from the bathroom, showered and smelling wonderful. Her skin glowed and he wondered what she did to it everyday, for it *must* be a spell.

Her golden hair was perfect as always and the curls had returned to the ends, though the black had grown since last night. Something was bothering her, but Harry didn't ask. She smiled radiantly when she saw him and threw herself into his arms without a word.

"You passed out on me." Harry teased her, "I guess you're all talk."

"I don't remember." She admitted, "I've been going over it for an hour now. I remember being in bed together, but it's just bits and pieces. I woke up wondering."

"We didn't, of course." his smile turned to a grin, "Personally, I blame the tequila. No more tequila for *you*, my dear. And no more complicated straps and hooks and buttons. You can only wear *normal* shirts from now on."

"Is that so?" she smiled.

"Yes. But you're welcome to wear *that skirt* every day if you'd like."

Sara laughed, "You sound a little disappointed, Captain. Did I leave you in a state?"

"You could say that. But I was in a state long before we got *here*. Next time we'll leave much earlier. We waited too long to come home!"

"It's all Severus' fault. Remember Harry? He made us wait for him and he took *forever*. Let's blame him."

"Excellent idea! That's it then. We'll blame Snape." He fell to the bed, pulling her down, too, laughing.

"You're awake *now*, Sara." He kissed her playfully.

"I *am*, Harry, but we can't."

"Of course we can! You told me last night you didn't want to take the vial back to Hogwarts. I can help you with that, you know." Harry smiled down at her; he was in a wonderful mood and attributed it partly to Snape's hangover potion.

"I don't have it anymore."

"Of course you do! I just saw it last night. Where is it?" He rummaged through the bedside table.

"I gave it away."

Harry stopped searching and looked at her. "Really, Sara. I'm just playing. We don't have to if you're not ready, you know that."

"*Really, Harry*. I gave it away."

Harry sat up. "To who?"

"Someone who needed it. That's really all I should say."

He was quiet for a moment, thinking about what she'd said. He looked up and she had turned away.

"*Hermione*." he whispered.

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Sara nodded her head. "She's very upset. They were drunk, of course and she remembers very little. It's not how she wanted it to happen."

"Oh no." he sighed, "How terrible for them, to have regrets. You know Sara, last night I was glad you fell asleep. Even in the state I was in it came as a relief. Dumbledore said something to me that made me think twice, but at the time I didn't care. It was only after you passed out that I stopped to think about how I felt about it. Poor Ron. He must feel terrible."

"I'm sure he does, Harry, and so does she, but what's done is done. At least they love each other."

"Is there anything we can do?"

"Yes. Leave them alone. We'll be on our own today."

"I think we almost made a terrible mistake last night, Sara. Dumbledore was right. Drinking *does* cloud your judgment."

Sara lowered her eyes and Harry could tell she felt ashamed.

"I want it to happen, Harry, we both do. But not like that. I don't ever want to feel the way Hermione feels right now. Promise me we'll keep our heads."

"I promise. I don't want you to have regrets."

"It's regrets I fear the most, you know. It's something we can never get back. There are no do-overs."

"What else are you afraid of?"

"You just turned seventeen and I'm about to. We feel like adults. We believe we think as adults, but do we? How do we know we aren't making foolish adolescent decisions? And how much of those decisions are influenced by our *physical* desires?"

"So you want to wait, then?"

"I don't know. The part of me that's afraid does. I know I love you, Harry. The question is *when*. I thought the time was right more than once, only to later feel relief that it hadn't happened." she hesitated, tears welled up in her eyes and when she spoke again her voice was soft and full of sorrow,

"I need my mother, Harry."

Harry put his arms around her and her head found his shoulder. "We both need advice. There have been many times when I've needed my parents, too, and this is one of them, but in the end it comes down to what we want. What we feel is right. I want you to be sure, Sara, and I'll wait as long as it takes."

Sara smiled. "You always know how to make everything ok, Harry."

"But if I have to wait then you can't wear that skirt anymore."

She laughed, "I'll wear gray sack dresses and big clunky boots, then. That should help."

"I'd just picture you in something else."

"Let's get lunch, then." She grinned, "I'm starving. After we'll take a ride out to the coast."

* * *

The drive was a long one, but very enjoyable. Sara had a reason for this particular trip, which she didn't confess to Harry until they had arrived at their destination. She had to; since it made little sense to him that they drive down a dirt road on what was obviously private property.

"I called a real estate agent while we were having lunch," she explained, "There are five lots here, four of them undeveloped, and it sounded simply perfect! I thought we could look at it."

"Look is all we *can* do until I make some more money."

"Let's say you let me buy the property." She saw he was about to protest and stopped him, grinning. "I can't have my boyfriend support me, Harry. It's wrong."

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Harry had intended to argue but laughed instead. "Sara, you're impossible."

"I also don't want these lots to be purchased by someone else in the meantime. It's perfect, isn't it?"

There are lots of trees by the road, which obscure the rest of the property from the view of passers-by.

It's twenty-one acres deep, so there's plenty of room to build our grand palace and keep it removed from the road while not putting it right on top of the cliffs. What do you think, Harry?"

"It does seem perfect. Let's have a look around." He took her hand and they began their walk, "It's a little overgrown. It will need to be cleared."

"I can have someone take care of that while we're at school."

"The little cottage is in pretty bad shape. We could have it knocked down."

"No. I'll have it remodeled. It will take some time to build the house we envisioned. We can live in it while we wait"

"Sara!" Harry protested, stopping to look her in the eye, "You *will not* pay for everything!"

"Why not? Would you stop being so damned *chivalrous*? We want to live a certain way and we have the means! Why not put it to good use? Is it really that important who pays for what? If it's *that* important, I will give you a loan for half and you can pay me back, but as far as I'm concerned what's mine is yours. Don't you plan to marry me Harry?"

Harry looked shocked, "Of course! I mean, if you want to."

"Then the money will be *ours* eventually, anyway."

Harry sighed, resigned. Arguing with her was simply impossible. "A loan it will have to be, Sara. I can't allow Snape's accusations to ring true, even the slightest bit."

"Okay, then. Let's go check out the cliffs."

The ocean pounded away at the rock wall as they lay prone on the ground, peering over the edge.

There were many large boulders on either side of a clearing where someone had once anchored a boat and a narrow, uneven path jutted out of the cliff. It gave Harry an idea.

"We could cut into the cliff right there," he pointed, "make a watery tunnel into an underground room."

"Brilliant, Harry! No one would ever see boats anchored outside. And we could put lots of spells on the entrance so it would go unnoticed. An easy escape if there was trouble."

"Already we're planning for trouble!"

"Better than being caught unprepared and without options."

"True." Harry pushed himself up and dusted off, "Is this where you want to live, Sara?"

"Yes! I love it! This is *definitely* where we should live. Can you picture it? Us, here, with our house? It

would make me so happy, Harry. *We* would be happy. We'd be together." He stood and helped her up. "Let's buy it."

"Thank you! It's so *perfect*. I can't wait for us to live here together."

"We shouldn't tell anyone about it yet, though. We'll surprise everyone."

"Of course. But should we tell Ron and Hermione?"

"Not yet. Let's do some work on it first."

* * *

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Sara insisted Harry keep the car until the end of the summer. He protested at first, but when she mentioned how it might affect the Dursleys he instantly warmed to the idea. They knew how he hated having to get up so early to walk to work and even worse, dragging himself home after such a long day that it would positively burn them to no longer have the pleasure of *that* particular torture. She allowed him to offer to pay the lease and accepted, but as soon as Snape turned his back she took Harry's arm and told him not to think of it. It was already paid for, she told him, as she had planned this the day Hermione spoke to Dudley.

Ron and Hermione, their eyes red-rimmed and puffy, had come down into the pub to say their goodbyes, but planned to stay another night, so they wouldn't be accompanying Harry, Sara, and Snape to King's Cross. Harry hugged Hermione, which was something he rarely did and smiled sympathetically at Ron. Sara hugged and kissed them both. They all promised to write as Hermione sniffled. Ron kept a comforting arm around her shoulders and Harry thought she looked emotionally shattered. He didn't want to leave without saying *something* to lift her spirits. She was always so strong, level headed and confident that he couldn't stand the sadness he saw in her face, but in the end he could think of nothing that would help. He gave her his warmest smile before leading Sara out the door.

It was easier than he thought, saying goodbye to Sara. They were ecstatic over the property. Sara had phoned the agent and her lawyer, who set up payment and would handle the transaction. They had met quickly with the agent, signing papers. The lots would be theirs very soon and they could start having work done on the land and on the little cottage. They agreed not to start building until after they graduated so they could handle things themselves. Until then, it was their secret.

"I'll see you in a couple of weeks." Sara whispered as she hugged him.

"I'll miss you." Harry sighed. "It was so nice to be near you again."

"I know, Harry. I'll miss you, too, but we'll see each other soon. And we won't have to hide anymore."

One last kiss and she boarded the empty train. Snape looked over his shoulder as he climbed up behind her, "She'll be perfectly safe, Potter."

"Take care of her Severus." Harry said, and then grinned "Or I'll kill you."

Snape actually smiled, then the door closed and he was gone. The train set off at once and Harry waved to Sara, who waved back, until he could see her no more.

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7. A Box of Memories

The Dursleys were furious when Harry arrived alone and driving a Mercedes Convertible. Uncle Vernon scowled and insisted he return the vehicle *at once*. Harry refused. Aunt Petunia argued that there wasn't enough room in the driveway for it, as it would block their car. Harry reasoned that he would be leaving first in the morning and would be the last to return at night, so it really wasn't a problem. On weekends he would park it on the street. Aunt Petunia argued that the neighbors would think he stole it.

Harry sighed, already exhausted by them, "Who steals a rental?"

"And who's paying?" his uncle demanded, "You *have* to save your money! You *will not* return here!"

"Don't worry about *that*." Harry half smiled, "If you must know, Sara rented the car for the summer, but she had to go back to Hog- uh, to school, so she's letting me use it."

"If *she* can go back, then why can't *you*?" Aunt Petunia spat.

"She's the Headmaster's niece, remember? She *lives* there." Harry's smile widened, "Besides, we purchased some land today. I won't *need* to come back here." They had promised not to tell anyone, but Harry couldn't help bringing it up. He knew that they expected him to fail miserably.

"Where is this *land*?" Uncle Vernon's face was turning redder by the minute.

"It's on the Channel." was all Harry said. He climbed the stairs, lugging his overstuffed backpack and some of his bags from Harvey Nichols. There were more in the car, but he'd have to make another trip. Harry smiled as he entered his room. He was happier than he'd ever been over a summer vacation and the future looked promising. *Very* promising indeed. Harry stood still for a moment, delight flooding his features as he remembered Sara's words. *Don't you plan to marry me, Harry?*

Thinking of Sara and the home they would have together, he made his way back out to the car and returned over-laden, only to find himself once again detained by his Aunt and Uncle.

"What is all this?" They demanded, pawing over the shopping bags as Harry continued his balancing act. "Don't lie to me, boy! You're spending the money!"

"I told you, I'm not!"

Uncle Vernon grabbed a handful of Harry's unruly hair. "*THEN YOU'VE RUN UP YOUR CREDIT!!*"

"Sara bought me some clothes for my birthday!" he half lied, wincing, "When we went to the Criterion! I didn't have anything to wear!"

"*The Criterion?* It's world-famous! They wouldn't let a...*someone like you* in a place like that. Stop lying *right now*."

"I'm not lying!" Harry yelled, growing annoyed, "In fact, we have pictures coming. I'll show them to

you."

"Pictures?"

"Yes. *At the Criterion.*"

"And who paid for *that*?" Uncle Vernon smiled as if he'd finally caught him with something and released Harry's head.

"Sara did."

"*How,*" Aunt Petunia smirked and crossed her arms across her chest, "does a young girl make so much money? What exactly does she *do* for it?"

Harry leveled his gaze at his miserable aunt, silently daring her to continue. When she said nothing

Harry narrowed his eyes further. "It's *inheritance.*" He glared at her, "In fact, she's filthy rich."

Delight crept into her scowl.

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"I thought that might change things." Harry shoved his hands in his pockets and stepped closer, looking her square in the eye. "Her parents have been dead less than a year. *Murdered* by the same hand that killed my parents." He felt his anger rising. "Don't *ever* be unkind to her again."

He turned away and climbed the stairs, trying hard not to drop anything. He wasn't stepping out of his room for the rest of the night, even if he left a trail of new clothes behind him.

He had barely sat down at his desk when there came a soft knock. Curious, Harry opened the door and there was his enormously piggish cousin Dudley.

"What do you want?" Harry asked without patience.

"Harry," Dudley whispered, "Are *all* the girls at your school as pretty as those two?"

"Not really." Harry answered honestly, "Most are just...average."

"Well, what did you do to make her, you know, *like* you?"

"I didn't *do* anything."

"Then how did you meet her? After all, you're not very handsome. And she's...*beautiful.*"

"She plowed me over in the hall."

"That's *it*?"

"Yes, Dudley. That's the whole story. Now if you don't mind, I have some things I want to do before I go to sleep."

"Will you be going for another weekend?"

"I don't know. Probably not."

"If you do, can I come?"

Harry laughed. "No. Goodnight." He shut the door, snickering, and went back to his desk. He picked up his quill and wrote:

Professor Dumbledore,

Sara, Ron, Hermione and I had a wonderful time this weekend. I know you fear for her, and Voldemort did show up, as you know, but I handled the situation and Sara is safe. I can continue to protect her, this you know as well, which is why I don't understand why you did not allow me to accompany Sara back to Hogwarts. I'm sure you have your reasons, but without knowing them it's rather hard to understand.

As for the purpose of this letter, I need your help. I have only been successful in thwarting Voldemort's attempts. How do we get rid of him for good? Is Sara to live with this threat forever? Without your wisdom and vast knowledge of the dark arts, I am without a plan. You know his strengths and weaknesses better than anyone. Perhaps together we can come up with something.

I just wanted to thank you. Sara's spirit is refreshed and she is happy once again. You made the right decision.

Sincerely,

Harry Potter

He folded and sealed the letter, then pulled open his box of special paper and changed quills.

Sara,

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I trust the journey back to school was uneventful and at best tolerable, considering you were stuck on a train for hours with Snape. Personally, I would have lost my mind, but I know you get along with him better than I do.

You were right about the car. The Dursley's were furious and came up with every lame excuse on Earth for me to return it. They said the neighbors would think I stole it. Does everyone worry so much about what the neighbors think? Then they said I couldn't have a car because Dudley didn't have one. On and on it went until they ran out of reasons and must have realized they were sounding quite ridiculous. I have to admit, I told them about our land. I couldn't help it. It frustrated them to no end. I actually enjoyed the whole scene, as annoying as it was, because I'm so totally happy right now that nothing can ruin my mood. Even the Dursleys.

I miss you already but I face the next two weeks with optimism and without the powerless desperation that I felt after our last goodbye. I want you to know that your decision to wait, while difficult, is understandable and I will do my best to respect it. You should find someone to talk to. I know I will be writing to Sirius tomorrow, asking for his thoughts on the situation. He's the closest thing I have to a father. I suggest you try Mrs. Granger or Mrs. Weasley. You said Hermione's mother took you to the doctor and you've spent some time there, but I suggest Mrs. Weasley. She's easy to talk to and a very caring person. She would be happy to help. After all, she's played mother to me many times and she's simply wonderful at it. I will send her an owl if you'd like.

I will write again tomorrow. Until then, I'll be thinking of you.

Love, Harry

Harry tied a letter to each of Hedwig's feet and gave her an affectionate caress on the head before sending her to her task. He opened the new spell book and picked up his quill, thinking a moment before beginning the opening statement.

He wrote at length and was surprised to see his messy hand reforming itself into perfectly legible, flowing script that resembled his penmanship at it's neatest. After this discovery, he barely formed words at all, merely drew broken lines along the page and was delighted to see his thoughts take shape with minimal effort from him. By the time he'd finished, he still had over an hour before he would have to sleep and started recording a few of the spells and charms he found most useful, broken into categories of different levels of threat. He had decided to devote the first part of his book to dealing with enemies, whether they be troublesome muggles, ruthless acquaintances, beasts, Dementors, or Voldemort himself, Harry listed tried and true ways of winning the day. In between each set of magical remedies he spoke at length of his experiences and stated many personal opinions as well as known truths and even a little of the wisdom he'd picked up here and there. When he finally laid down his quill, his eyes heavy, he was impressed with what he'd accomplished.

Thanks to the script-forming charm the book possessed, he thought as he pulled the covers over his shoulders, he would be able to complete the basic outline of what he had planned from beginning to end before he returned to school. After that he would use the little time he'd have in the evenings and on weekends to add afterthoughts, new information he might come across during the year, and anything else he was able to research in the school's library. Harry decided to send Ron a note the next night to fill him in on the book's ability so he could get a head start as well. After all, the girls were far ahead of them in the construction of their books and would be annoyed if Harry and Ron showed up with little or nothing. Time would be hard to come by once classes were in full swing, with assignments, studying, Quidditch and finding time to spend with the girls. Concentrating on the body of their books would be near impossible. Best to get it done now.

Harry rolled over and his thoughts turned to the secret magic the books would perform after they used the binding spell. So far, none of them could think of anything great. His mind turned the question over and over, but the only things Harry could think of he immediately tossed out. By the time he drifted off an idea had begun to take shape, though it would elude him for months.

* * *

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All three of the Dursleys awaited him when he wandered in after work late Monday night. Harry found them in the kitchen, their attention focused on a package that lay unopened in the center of the table. Harry grew excited and took the empty chair, snatching up the heavy manila envelope.

"Your pictures?" Asked Uncle Vernon.

Harry looked at the return address and nodded.

"Well, let's see. Go on, open it."

Harry tore the heavy paper enthusiastically, he'd been anxiously anticipating the arrival of Mr. Sanders' photographs, but hadn't expected to get them so soon. Harry guessed there were about twenty 8x10s, plus the copies of the best shot, which were wrapped separately. He set them aside. He smiled at the one on top before handing it to his impatient uncle. He flipped through the rest, ignoring Dudley's demands to see them.

"What's this you're wearing? Is that a *designer suit*?" Uncle Vernon bellowed, incredulous.

"Versace." Harry mumbled, too preoccupied to pay much attention.

"You're all outside! How do we know you went in?"

"Turned away at the door, I'll wager." Aunt Petunia added, her snide tone lost on Harry, who sat smiling warmly at image after image.

"Did you hear me, boy? You didn't go in, did you?" Vernon insisted, half amused, half angry.

Harry suddenly dropped the pictures on the table and they were quickly grabbed up by Dudley and Mrs. Dursley. He left his seat and told them he'd be right back.

Harry returned a moment later and dropped a pack of matches in front of his uncle. He had put them in the pocket of his jacket as a souvenir, but mostly so if Sara decided to smoke again, he could accommodate her.

Uncle Vernon turned them over in his large, thick hands. "These are matches."

"Yes." Harry agreed, "Matches from the Criterion."

"The only thing this proves is that you've taken up smoking."

"I have a feeling you wouldn't believe me even if I brought back my dinner *and* the Maitre D!" Harry gave a sigh of frustration, "And I haven't taken up *smoking*. You said we hadn't gone inside. Those prove we did. They don't have someone handing out matches on the sidewalk."

"What did it look like?" Uncle Vernon asked with a suspicious eye.

"Oh for Heaven's sake!" Harry yelled, exasperated. He quickly recounted the atmosphere and the decor, right down to the appearance of his chair. He described the Maitre D, their server, and the pattern of the silverware. He told them what he and each of his friends had for dinner.

Finally, his uncle had run out of questions. "Humph." he said, "they must be lowering their standards. They'll have a drive-up window next."

Harry gathered up the pictures and reclaimed his matches, carrying them back to his room. He'd ignored the owls in his hurry to find proof of his visit to the famous restaurant, but now he gave them his full attention. Ron's yellowish owl was resting on the back of the chair next to Hedwig. Harry lifted Ron's bird, last year's birthday gift from Hermione and himself, and petted his head at bit. "Hello there,

Hemmingway. Are you hungry?" The owl gave a short hoot, which Harry took as a yes and deposited him in Hedwig's cage.

Harry sat in the chair and Hedwig jumped onto his shoulder. He felt her soft feathers rub against his cheek, her favorite show of affection. He ran a hand over her wing before opening his letters, Ron's first.

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Harry,

I thought you'd like to know that Fred and George expanded into the neighboring storefront today (you remember the one I pointed out) and will be remodeling it all week. I'm glad I bought that extra floo powder. We'll all be using it to help them out. Dad and I are going to go every morning after work. Mom and Ginny have been bringing them meals and even Percy took the time to help put up shelves. They've been stockpiling extra merchandise all year and have a sizable inventory already. I'll keep you updated. Fred and George ask that you come in on re-opening day, which is this Saturday, because they have a surprise for you. Believe me, Harry; you're going to love it!

You'll never believe what happened! I've been named Head Boy! Mom and Dad got the letter while we were in London and they couldn't be more pleased. I don't understand why they picked me of all people. I do well enough in my classes, but I can't possibly have the best grades in the whole school! The first few years we hardly even studied! Well, not like Hermione did, anyway, and that's what it takes, we both know that. (Percy was just like her.) I was surprised enough to be chosen as a prefect! As bewildering as it is, I'll take it. After all, I don't have much chance of being named Quidditch Captain now, do I? (I can't wait to see Malfoy's face!)

I've got some great ideas for my spell book. I'm going to write a whole section based on applying the strategies of chess to any sort of confrontation. I've thought of a whole slew of spells, charms, potions, and general trickery that work well with the theories I plan to present. I also want to include a section on the benefits of charming certain muggle artifacts and how they could be of use to wizards. Fred and George are the inspiration for yet another section I want to write. Can you guess what that's about? That's right, creative dueling. There are some really hilarious things you can do to people! Last week Fred gave our mother a wooden leg and I just about laughed myself silly, watching her shuffle around the house until my father came home.

I plan to spend at least an hour a day writing, just so the girls don't bloody kill me, but I doubt it will amount to much. Maybe fifteen or twenty pages at best. I'll have to write big so it looks like more. On a different note, I understand you know what happened with Hermione and I. Got any advice? You know her well enough and I'm not exactly good with words. We are okay with it now, but I still feel like a creep and I know she's upset. Mom knew there was something wrong the minute I got home and she managed to get it out of me. I thought she'd be disappointed, but she was really great. She seems to think that if we give it some time we'll both feel better about it, but I don't know. Hermione cried all day, but mom says she'll be alright. What do you think? What should I do?

Your Friend,

Ron

Harry was so excited he decided to respond even before reading Sara's letter.

Ron,

Congratulations! I can't believe your luck! My best friends are Head boy and Head Girl. (Just like my parents were.) And me Quidditch Captain. Throw Sara into the mix and what a team we'll make! As for your bewilderment, don't be so hard on yourself. Grades can't be all they consider. You're a brilliant student; you have original ideas and an understanding of concepts that far exceed what we're taught. Obviously, our teachers have recognized your potential.

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This is reflected in the design you have chosen for your spell book. How original! I can't wait to read it, it sounds very interesting. I would never consider the application of chess strategies to anything except chess. And creative dueling! Another stroke of genius! All I've come up with is dealing with enemies. How thoroughly mundane. I was becoming quite vain about it until I read your letter. Keep thinking! And you don't have to write big. In fact, you don't have to write at all! Last night I discovered that all you have to do is move the quill and your words will form themselves. After that I did little more than scribble and wrote about forty pages. Let's just hope the girls haven't caught on or they'll beat us to the finish yet again.

As for the situation with Hermione, I'm afraid I can't be of much help. I can only offer my sympathy. Your mother is probably right, though. After she has had time to accept what has happened and realizes how much you care for her I can't imagine it will feel so devastating. It's bad, but unchangeable and certainly not the end of the world. All the advice I can give you is to make it special should you decide to try again, only I suggest sobriety. Hermione will be okay. She's a survivor. Tell Fred and George I will be glad to visit their shop on Saturday. Send along my congratulations on the expansion as well. The fact that they have a surprise for me, to be honest, fills me with dread. I can only imagine! Will I see you there?

The pictures from the Criterion came today, so I'm sending you one of the copies Sara ordered and one for Hermione as well. I know you'll be writing to her before I get the chance, so please pass it along. As for the rest, I'll have to wait to see what Sara wants to do with them since they belong to her. I can't wait for you to see them! They're great!

Talk to you later.

Your Friend, Harry

P.S. Malfoy is going to turn six shades of purple!

Harry wrapped the pictures and the letter in brown paper and sent Hemmingway back to Ron. He sat

back down with Sara's letter and was glad he'd read Ron's first. At least his good mood lasted for a little while. He opened the box of stationary and picked up the green quill. He first related the good news about Ron, told her about Fred and George's grand re-opening, bragged about how much he'd accomplished on his spell book, and then addressed her concerns.

Dumbledore, while she was gone, had moved her piano into the dining hall and expects her to play for the students regularly. Harry knew how she felt about performing publicly, even for an audience of one, and felt just awful for her. Sara had to be extremely comfortable, Harry knew, for she possessed a sort of modesty that amounted to profound stage fright. Her mother, she claimed, had been completely at ease performing, but Sara was horrified by and quite frightened at the prospect. Harry knew Sara had a talent that far surpassed her mother's and mentioned the fact in his letter, but he knew it would do no good. He could only offer encouragement. Sara would have to face her fear all by herself.

On top of that, and in Harry's opinion far worse, Snape was sleeping in Sara's tower, stretched out on the sofa by the fireplace. She was still made to close the doors at night and wasn't happy about it, but she agreed it was a fair compromise and besides, she was getting used to it. It was either that or the cell she'd occupied before her escape attempt.

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Snape, she claimed, was decent company. Harry found it impossible to believe, but Sara claimed they'd had two "lovely" evenings of discussion and listening to music. It wasn't the worst that could have happened, she'd said, but she didn't understand why she couldn't open the doors if Snape was right there. Harry chose his words very carefully when his answer was that on his own, Snape couldn't protect *himself* against Voldemort, much less someone else. He reminded her of how easily Voldemort, nowhere near his full strength, had propelled Snape across the room at the Leaky Cauldron only days before. He had to tip-toe around the issue, making her understand without leaving her feeling unprotected and vulnerable. Harry thought Snape was better than nothing and was glad he was there, even though he couldn't help feeling envious and disliked the Potions professor even more. In fact, the only good news was that Sara had convinced Dumbledore that Hogwarts needed to have more parties with music and dancing, tables of food, butterbeer by the keg and bowls of punch among other things. So far, she'd said, he had agreed to make the Yule Ball an annual event. Plus, there would be a Valentine's dance Sara claimed would have a light romantic theme with roses for sale all that day. Plus there would be Chocolate sculptures and tables loaded with deserts. Also, big party on St. Patrick's Day with prizes for the best all-green outfits and an Irish-themed talent show. (Sara claimed she would sing a U2 song, but Harry wondered if she would go through with it.) It sounded like fun and Sara had been appointed to head the not-yet-formed party committee. One more thing to keep her mind occupied. Harry thought it was a wonderful idea and evidently, so did Dumbledore.

By the time Fawks flew through the window Harry was so tired he could barely see, but he was so anxious to read the message from Dumbledore that his weariness all but deserted him. Harry was surprised to see Fawks instead of one of the school owls, but was glad Dumbledore had sent him. He loved the sight of the enormous red and gold bird, so interesting and regal in appearance, that Harry wished he could have a phoenix as well, but they were as rare as his invisibility cloak, if not more so. He lit on Harry's shoulder and pushed his head against the side of Harry's face, as Hedwig often did, and made to fly off.

"Wait, Fawks!" He whispered, "You can bring a letter to Sara. Hedwig is tired."

The grand bird wrapped her talons around the back of Harry's chair. "Just let me read this first. You can rest while I do."

Dear Harry,

In response to the questions you posed in your letter, I have this to say. Now that I know a threat lingers so near to my niece I can adequately provide protection for her, as long as the doors to her rooms are not flung wide for every passing intruder. (She has become more sensible in that respect and is complying admirably.) Also, she is now well guarded. I know you may think Severus Snape inadequate against such a formidable opponent, but rest assured the villain need only be dispatched. There is no real threat of danger to her life as long as she keeps her head and I have explained this to Sara at length. There is of course, some, but in a crisis Sara can defend herself, and it is this, for the most part, that need be avoided. That concealment is crucial. I believe you fully understand this. As you can see, your involvement is not necessary until the start of term when Professor Snape will no longer be available to stand guard over Sara. It is not, as you believe, because I did not seriously consider your request. On the contrary, I have a good knowledge of your capabilities, especially concerning this particular wizard, and believe you to be completely sincere in your devotion to Sara's safety. However, because your presence for the next couple of weeks is not entirely necessary and also due to the fact that you have prior commitments to your employer (which I commend you on), I decided you should remain with your relatives until your scheduled return.

As for your determination to find a permanent solution to the problem at hand, there are aspects, only recently come to our attention, that need careful consideration before any planning can be done or action taken. I will explain this to you more fully in person and I know you will appreciate the perplexity of this new twist. There are options, Harry, although I would be willing to hear any ideas you may have, for those options are few and perilous.

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Best Regards,

Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster

"It doesn't sound very promising, does it?" Harry asked Fawks. The phoenix gave no response. He gave her the letter he'd written to Sara and carried the incredibly heavy bird to the open window on his

shoulder. "I'll see you soon. Have a safe trip back." In a graceful flutter he was gone.

* * *

Saturday finally rolled around and Harry made his way into London. The weather was still nice enough, but summer was drawing to an end in dreary old England and the air had taken a chill. The sun shone brightly in protest and Harry drove with the top down, thinking it was no worse than playing Quidditch in early spring. The wind whipped his already untamed hair as he smiled to himself, humming along to the radio.

He parked the Mercedes and hurried into the Leaky Cauldron, stopping to have a drink and pass a few minutes with Tom, the bartender. He said a few hellos around the room, and then made his way through the back and into Diagon Alley.

Harry shifted the gift he carried and made his way into a packed house. The patrons were mostly young boys, but there were adults there as well; quite a few of them, in fact, all come to browse the newly enlarged store. The side wall had been knocked out and the combined showroom was huge. He found Fred and George behind the newly placed counter along the back of the shop, boasting of the awesome effects of their infamous tongue swelling candy. Harry laid the gift on the counter and waited for them to finish, watching Ron run the register. He hadn't seen Harry come in.

"Hey Cap'n!" Fred yelled and a genuine smile bloomed on his face. He was soon joined by his twin who gave Harry the same salute. Harry hadn't realized how much he'd missed their vivacious antics and was happy to be back in their company. His smile grew and he pushed the frame at them, wrapped in paper and a bow.

"Got you something." Harry grinned, "To bring you good luck."

Fighting over who got to unwrap it, they tore the paper off in less than a second. "Wow, Harry! This is great!" Fred exclaimed.

"Good luck *indeed!*" George agreed, "Thanks Harry! We have to hang it right away, or else we'll be jinxed." George took off with the frame, which held an enlargement of the picture by Harry's bed. The Champion Gryffindor Quidditch team from last term, their last game together. He knew they would love it and he could tell they were sincere. People gathered around to get a look at what George was hanging and Harry cringed when he began to hear his name pass many lips from the legion of shoppers behind him "Harry Potter?" and "Isn't that Harry Potter?" as well as "You know Harry Potter?"

"Harry's the best Quidditch player in the world!" he heard George say, "Why, he's our Captain!"

Harry almost laughed at the chaotic murmur this statement prompted, which of course encouraged George. "He's a horrible person. Real ugly and downright rude if you ask me. If it wasn't for Quidditch, why I'd have no use for the creep." there were many shocked and surprised whispers and even a few gasps among the listeners, which by now was just about everyone in the place. Harry even heard one *It can't be!* George cracked a smile, "Isn't that right, Cap'n?"

Mortified, Harry sneaked a peek at his friend on the stepstool, only to find the whole gathering looking at him. He swiped his hair over his forehead, but it was too late.

"It's him! It's Harry Potter!"

Suddenly Harry was surrounded and shaking countless hands that didn't seem to be attached to any particular face. Everyone was greeting him at once and Harry felt once again thrust into the spotlight. He was mobbed, but managed a glance over at Ron, who was grinning. "Hi ya, Harry!" Ron yelled.

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"Hi Ron!" Harry yelled back. When he faced front again there was George, his hair deliberately parted to reveal his forehead, upon which was a lightning shaped scar. Harry was shocked for a moment, and then burst into wild laughter. George peeled it off, gave it a wave, then stuck it back on and turned to the customers. "Harry Potter scars, only a five knuts each! They're reusable! The cheapest Halloween costume you can find!"

"You can have a free one, Harry." Fred told him, "On the house!"

"Sure," Harry laughed, "But where would I put it?"

George looked around Harry, "Hey Fred, go get it."

Fred disappeared into the back. "You're gonna love this." George assured him.

"Then why am I nervous?"

George laughed, "Don't worry, Harry! It won't hurt much. You'll recover in a few days."

Fred re-emerged and laid something on the counter. Ironically, it was frame shaped. Harry picked it up and was laughing again instantly. It was a wizard photograph, the kind that moved, and the scene played over and over. Harry laughed until his words were choked with giggles and his stomach was on the verge of cramps. "This...is the *funniest* thing...I've ever seen." He watched the picture again and again as he and Malfoy raced toward the grass at lighting speed. Harry's image pulled up, but Malfoy and his Firebolt exploded into the ground in a cloud of dust and broom shards, then started from the beginning.

Fred pulled out his wand and tapped the frame. "*Audio!*" Suddenly they heard the excited voice of Lee Jordan booming from within the picture. *Harry Potter ANNIHILATES Draco Malfoy with the Wronski Feint! Harry Potter RULES!*

"I told you you'd like it, Harry!" Ron yelled as he frantically rang sales and gave change. "I laughed for days!"

"A friend of mine took that." Fred explained, "He put a spell on it. It'll never stop replaying itself. It really ought to put Malfoy in a state."

"I love it!" Harry beamed, "And to think, I thought I was going to need the apothecary when I left

here."

"That was the greatest moment in the history of Quidditch!" George bragged, "Good thing we made plenty of copies! We're selling them for six knuts each." He turned and raised his voice, "Watch the greatest Quidditch player at Hogwarts perform the *most dangerous* move in the history of sports!" Fred chimed in, "And the fellow on the ground finally gets his come-uppance!" he turned back to Harry, "We could make a fortune off you!"

"Glad to be of service, gentlemen, but I must be going. I've got some landscaping jobs lined up and I still have a few stops to make. The place is great! Thanks for the picture!"

"Same to you, Cap'n!" They stood at attention and gave him a military salute, as usual. Harry waved and left the store wearing an enormous smile.

* * *

Harry spent over an hour in one of the mall's specialty stores, carefully selecting what he'd come for. He left having spent more than forty percent of the contents of his bank account, which should have concerned him a great deal, but the only things he felt were hope and elation. It was a thoroughly muggle gesture, but in the end it would be well worth it.

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The long drive home was pleasant, if not a little brisk, but Harry didn't really notice. He'd taken to playing the stereo very loud and had bought a second-hand Beatles CD, which he listened to most of the time. His thoughts were trained on the future, of spending his last year at Hogwarts with the girl he loved and his two best friends. Of yet another triumphant season of Quidditch, and of graduation and the freedom that came with it, to perform magic anytime, anywhere he wanted. And of the box on the seat beside him. His thoughts went farther, to sharing the little cottage with Sara while the house they dreamed of came to fruition only meters away. He wondered what sort of work he would be doing by then and imagined himself making loads of money. He smiled as he envisioned their wedding day, with all their friends in attendance and smiles on their faces, Sara radiant in a beautiful white gown, the threat to her vanquished.

* * *

Friday arrived and Harry made his last bank deposit. Mr. Spaulding at the office had shaken Harry's hand and asked him to return at the end of the school year for permanent employment in the company. The man who'd once glared at Harry with distrust even promised a more befitting position with a wage to go with it. Harry was most pleased and thanked him, but knew he would never see Mr. Spaulding again. He would say goodbye to this particular section of England the next morning and, hopefully, never return.

The send-off they gave him at the market was rather touching and Harry found he was sad to be leaving. At break time he wandered into the staff room only to find the other employees he worked with who had the night off, as well as the manager and several cashiers had come in. They'd brought a cake and threw him a little good-bye party.

Arriving back at the Dursleys', Harry by-passed the kitchen and went straight to his room where he found Hedwig returned and a note from Sara on the desk. There was a letter from Sirius, too, and a strange bird in Hedwig's cage.

Harry was slightly annoyed by the presumptuous bird and felt bad for Hedwig. Who knows how long she had been resting on the chair, afraid to enter her cage? "Why don't you just make yourself at home?" he muttered.

"Make yourself at home!" the bird repeated, squawked, and then said the phrase a second time. Harry laughed and his attitude toward the multi-colored bird lightened. It resembled a parrot, though not a breed he'd ever seen. He wondered where Sirius was hiding now and decided to read his correspondence first, since he'd written more than a week ago and had been awaiting his reply most impatiently.

Dear Harry,

It was nice of your girlfriend to lend you the owl. Unfortunately, it died. The poor thing barely made it here and I did my best to care for it, but it eventually succumbed to exhaustion and the malady that caused it. I had to send Topenga in its place. Please give Sara my apologies and the replacement bird. She eats parrot food.

Thank you for the pictures. I can't believe how much you've grown since I saw you last! What a handsome young gentleman you've become! Ron as well. And both of you so very tall. I was shocked by Hermione's appearance. I don't remember her being so pretty! What did she do to her hair? Didn't she have buck teeth? It can't all be spells, can it? And then there's your lovely Sara. To tell you the truth, I'm surprised to see you've found such a beautiful young lady. She's quite stunning and looks exactly like her mother.

The four of you together in your proper evening attire make a rather attractive group! I wish I could have been there.

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The Quidditch pictures are just great! I can't imagine a family so talented as to have three brothers make the team. What are the odds? There are about 250 Gryffindors and only seven Quidditch positions, one of which is yours! I swear, the lot of you look so happy I can't help but grin while looking at the picture. Congratulations on yet another win, you deserve it. I grow more proud everyday. Your father would be equally as pleased with the person you've become, if not more so. As for your questions, Harry, I have to admit, I was never good with the long-term aspect. I'll do my best, but I doubt I'll be much help. Women are complicated. That is a well known fact, but there are simple rules to follow.

1. You'll never talk her into or out of something once she's made up her mind, so learn to compromise. They respond better to that. Also, she'll change her mind so many times it'll make your head spin.
2. Choose your words carefully; they're sensitive and once you've said the wrong thing you can't take it back.

3. Be honest and sincere. (No doubt you are) Regaining the trust of someone you love is incredibly difficult. Deception of any kind lingers in the backs of their minds long after they've forgiven you.
4. Give her the space she needs. You were right about not wanting to push her. Regrets can be the downfall of even the closest relationship.

She keeps changing her mind because she's afraid of that very thing. You have proven perceptive in that respect. You listen to her. She loves you and wants to take your relationship to another level and is, in a sense, trying to push herself into something she isn't ready for. As difficult as it can be, especially for a teenager, you have no choice but to be patient.

It was a good idea, suggesting she talk to Ron's mother. Sara feels lost without her own and, even though she shows adult restraint and reasoning, she needs guidance. You do as well and I wish I could ease your mind, but this is the extent of my knowledge. You're a good, moral person, Harry. You're doing just fine. Sara will be lucky to have you as a husband.

Congratulations on the purchase of your property! How exiting for you both. The house you envision sounds simply wonderful and I promise to visit you there after its completion. I'll look forward to it. Give Ron and Hermione my congrats on being named Head Boy and Girl. Tell them I'm very proud and to keep up the good work. You, too, Mr. Quidditch Captain! I'll write again soon, Harry.

Warmest Regards, S.

Harry's spirit lightened even more. He loved hearing from Sirius, though it was only a few times a year. Sirius' advice also helped put him at ease. He was doing things right, it seemed, and Sara was feeling lost and uncertain. Thinking of Sara, he opened her letter.

Harry,

We'll see each other tomorrow at last! Can you believe our wait is finally over? Are you as excited as I am? I have to admit, the prospect of going to classes with the other students instead of following them on the 'Map or watching them wander the grounds from the roof of the tower fills me with anticipation. I also love the idea of seeing you during the day and in a more social setting. You have to agree, the whole Rapunzel thing was a little strange. Being so removed, yet so close.

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I have been thinking about the "advancement" of our relationship, but I fear I'm still not ready. I have so many personal issues I need to work out. Only now that I've been apart from my Riesling and no longer preoccupied with my "imprisonment" have I really started to deal with the death of my parents. For so long I tried to pretend it didn't happen and pushed away my grief, allowing only brief moments of understanding. I have found that deciding to create a more powerful bond with someone I love while coming to grips with such a tremendous loss is overwhelming and lends to my confusion. I know it is frustrating for you, as it is for me too, but I ask that you give me a little more time. I know you understand and I am grateful.

I also have to admit that what happened to Ron and Hermione has left me terrified. I've tried to rationalize it, knowing you and I will do things right when the time comes, but it has put a fear in the back of my mind. The same thing almost happened to us! If we hadn't gone back in for a little hard liquor I fully believe it would have. The thought scares me. I don't want a moment of poor judgment to jeopardize the life we will have together. We'll talk more when you arrive.

Park the car at King's Cross Station, put the keys in the glove box, set the alarm and lock the doors. I have arranged for a rental agent to pick it up there. I hope you enjoyed it. We'll buy a new convertible after grad and you can drive me around in it.

Brad Silverman, my lawyer, tells me we will be closing on the property in about a week! I'm so excited I can hardly contain myself! Imagine, a big empty lot. The plans we can make! We'll spend all year designing.

Anyway, don't bother to respond tonight. I'll see you tomorrow. (!!!)

Love Always, Sara

Harry put the letters into his trunk with mixed feelings. He was excited to see Sara, could hardly wait, in fact, but she was so troubled. Should they lighten their relationship until she was more stable? How long did they have to wait? It kept getting pushed back and now it was indefinite. He wanted to be sensitive and considerate, he loved Sara, but what she described could take years. Harry sighed; his curiosity and frustration were getting the best of him. There was nothing he could do. He would wait forever if she asked him to.

Harry broke the rules and used magic to create extra space in his trunk. He had to pack everything he owned, not that he required a moving van, but his collection of stuff had grown considerably over the years and with the clothes Sara bought him it was impossible to get it all in. He quickly scribbled off a note to the Ministry of Magic, explaining himself, and sent Hedwig off with it right away. He doubted they'd throw him out of Hogwarts for such a minor infraction, but better safe than sorry.

Closing the lid, he opened it again to reveal a whole new set of contents. "Cool," he said and grinned, raising and lowering the lid over and over again. He made one last trip around his room, checking to make sure everything was in the trunk and when he was satisfied that it was, he went down to the kitchen for some tea and a biscuit or two.

Aunt Petunia was still up and sitting at the kitchen table, a small box near to one hand and a scattering of papers and photographs before her. She looked upset and Harry wondered if he should leave.

Hesitating in the doorway for a moment, he finally made up his mind to go back to his room when she spoke.

"Harry?"

"Yes Aunt Petunia?"

"Sit down. I have something for you."

Harry took the seat across from her, unused to the soft tone in her hushed voice, especially directed at him. He waited.

"This box came from my mother's house. It's been in the attic for years. I forgot about it, really, but by all rights it belongs to you. Take it with you tomorrow." She got up to leave.

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"Wait." Harry said, "What *are* all these things?"

"They're pictures, obviously. Of my sister and I when we were children. Before all that *foolishness* started."

"Can't you put all that aside for just a little while? Aunt Petunia, tell me about my mother. The nice things you remember. *Anything*." He added, "Please. I'll make us some tea."

"Well, I don't see what it can hurt. Sit down, Harry. I'll get the tea."

* * *

Harry awoke to the smell of bacon wafting up to greet him in his bed, and his stomach gave a rumble of approval. Slipping on his glasses, he was startled and disoriented at the appearance of his room, empty, except for his trunk and Hedwig's cage, the walls bare. It took a moment to remember that he was leaving today. At last saying goodbye to the Dursleys, never to return. He wouldn't see this room again. The thought frightened him a little, though it did not make him sad.

Uncle Vernon's booming voice bellowed up at him from downstairs, "Get up, boy! Don't you dare miss that train!"

The train to Hogwarts Harry thought as an enormous smile planted itself on his face. He would see Ron and Hermione in just a few hours and awhile after that they would finally reunite with Sara.

"I'm up!" He called. "I'll be right down." Only part of his mind was on breakfast. The rest was anxious to feel at home in his school uniform and robe, with his wand at the ready instead of crammed uncomfortably in his sock. And he couldn't wait to walk the halls as a seventh year student.

Pulling a light sweater over his head, he made for the door, only to be stopped dead by a strange letter on the empty desk, addressed to *Mr. Harry Potter*. He'd forgotten about his note to the Ministry of Magic and opened the envelope with a little trepidation.

Mr. Potter,

As you know, the rule against students using magic away from Hogwarts is steadfast and enforced. It is also on record that one letter of warning was sent to your place of residence several years ago and such warnings do not expire.

However, considering your excellent reputation as a student and the circumstances outlined in your apology, we are willing to overlook the matter this one time. Good luck in your final year of schooling.
Ministry of Magic

Odd, Harry thought, *no signature and no name*. He shrugged and slipped it into his backpack, just in case he was questioned at some point. At the moment, his stomach reminded him that breakfast was calling.

In the kitchen, the Dursleys were just finishing and Uncle Vernon had taken up *The London Times*. A plate was set for him and he ate hungrily. Dudley's eyes were trained on the TV and Aunt Petunia was gathering dishes.

"Hurry up so I can wash the plate." She told Harry.

"I'm almost finished." he replied. Harry quickly polished off the scrambled eggs and bacon, gulped down his orange juice, folded his toast in half and ate it in three bites, then handed his plate, glass, and silverware to his aunt, who was rather quiet this morning. Harry couldn't help thinking the memories she'd shared the night before had saddened her a little. He found he almost felt bad for her. She'd been nearly pleasant as they'd gone through the old photos and odds and ends in the box.

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It perplexed him, confused his emotions, the way they had shown him occasional moments of kindness this summer. Uncle Vernon waving with a smile as Harry prepared to drive off in the Mercedes with his friends, Aunt Petunia giving him mementos of his mother, even Dudley asking to tag along on a weekend trip. They despised him to his very core and he knew it. Perhaps it was just because he was leaving.

"Your train leaves at eleven?"

"Yes, Uncle Vernon. I need to get going soon. I have to make a stop on the way as well. Is there a pet shop near King's Cross, do you know?"

"Why I believe there's one in that little plaza just before you make the turn."

"Great. Well, I'd better load the car. Thank you for breakfast, Aunt Petunia. I was starving."

"Best to leave on a full stomach." She half smiled. "Dudley, help Harry with his trunk so he doesn't mark up the floor."

For the first time Harry could remember, Dudley didn't argue.

Harry went up the stairs and grabbed a handle, but Dudley simply stood at the other end of the trunk, making no motion to lift it. Harry straightened. "What is it?"

"Really, Harry. How did you meet that girl? Did you use *magic*?"

Harry smiled in spite of himself. He couldn't believe Dudley was asking him about girls. Dudley hated him. "I told you how we met."

"After that!" Harry smirked as Dudley's face reddened, "Did you use one of those love potions? Slip it into her drink?"

"I did nothing of the sort! We just have a lot in common. I didn't use any sort of *alternative means*."

"Could I go to your school? Would they let me in do you think?"

Harry was shocked. After all Dudley's attempts to get his parents to throw Harry out, make him sleep in the yard, or just plain distrust him even more, Dudley wanted to go to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. He couldn't wait to tell Ron and Hermione about *this!*

"I think if your parents heard you say that we'd both be put through the ringer." Harry grinned, "You have to be invited there. They send letters to people who are...*predisposed*."

"So all the girls are strange anyway, like you?"

"In your world, yes." Harry glanced at the clock and sighed, "Now grab an end."

* * *

"Now remember, Harry, if you show up here next year you won't be taken in! You are your own man now."

"Don't worry, Uncle Vernon. Sara and I have everything worked out and we both have money saved. I won't be back. I can assure you of that."

"Already planning to live in *sin*, are you?" Aunt Petunia asked, the usual poison was gone from her voice, but still her eyes narrowed as she looked at Harry.

Without a word Harry rummaged in his bag until his fingers found the little velvet box he'd purchased a week before. He opened it and held it out to her.

His aunt stared as her hand fluttered about her throat. "That's very proper of you, Harry. But you're young. Don't be so foolish."

"I don't plan to give it to her until school's out." Harry closed the box and returned it to the backpack.

"And don't worry, Uncle Vernon. I still have enough saved to get me through."

"I hope so, Harry, for your sake. If you run into trouble, Mr. Spaulding said he'll take you back."

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"I have to go now; I don't want to miss the train. Goodbye Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia. Goodbye Dudley. Good Luck."

"Good luck to you, too, Harry. You'll need it." Uncle Vernon smiled.

"Stay out of trouble." Aunt Petunia told him, "And treat the girl well."

"I will." Harry smiled, "Good bye."

He walked quickly to the Mercedes and jumped behind the wheel, turning to wave one last time before pulling away from the curb.

As soon as he was out of sight it was all he could do to keep his exhilaration from spilling out of his mouth. By the time he'd reached the highway he could control it no longer. He beeped his horn, raised a fist in the air and shouted as loud as he could. "I'M FREEEEEE"

Harry set the CD to play *Revolution*, turned it up as loud as it would go and sang along, a huge grin on his face and all the dimness gone from his heart. *He was free.*

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Book Two: Blind Faith

8. The Orb of Arassel

"Come on, Harry! Hurry up!" Ron beckoned from the top of the steps as Harry stood, smiling up at the enormous front doors feeling a kind of warm, fuzzy nostalgia. Like the warmth and contentedness one must feel coming home after a long bout of unpleasantness.

He pushed the Dursleys out of his mind. Vernon, Petunia, and Dudley were a part of the past now. Gone, probably forever. He was on his own and his mind raced with the excitement of it. Some small part of him saddened at the loss of his only living blood relatives, the only real ties he had to his parents, disagreeable as they were. There were none on his father's side that he knew of and Harry felt suddenly alone in the world. That same small part of him was just a little bit scared. He had his friends, though. And he had the whole Weasley clan who he considered his surrogate family and of course, the grandfatherly Professor Dumbledore. And there was always Sara, who he loved unreservedly. Who wanted to know if he was planning on making her his wife and filled him with hope for the future.

"Harry! We'll wind up sitting with the first years!"

"Are you going to make Sara wait for you all night?" Hermione implored.

Still smiling, he ran to catch up.

Taking seats among the other Gryffindors in the great hall, Harry looked for Sara. All the teachers were there, even Professor Trelawney, but there was no sign of her *apprentice*.

Hermione leaned in to whisper, "Where is she?" Harry shrugged and turned back to the sorting ceremony, struggling to pay attention. Farther down the table he heard Dean Thomas ask Seamus Finnegan, (both of whom shared a room with Harry, Ron, and Neville,) "Why's there a *piano* in here?" Seamus gave no answer, only looked as bewildered as Dean himself and shrugged his shoulders.

"I guess we'll find out." Dean decided.

Poor Sara Harry thought, giving the piano a glance just as Dumbledore stood to give the usual announcements about the Forbidden Forest being forbidden, etc.

"In addition, I would like to introduce our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Adolphus Morgio. Professor Morgio has been hard at work for many years tracking our darkest adversaries and has many a disturbing tale I'm sure. He should prove a most able and interesting teacher."

Professor Morgio nodded slightly, offered a severe and miserable smile and lowered into his chair, swatting back a tuft of what looked to be rather greasy black hair. His long, pointy nose and pale,

sallow skin glowed gossamer in the light of the candles floating above. His small black eyes, set deep in discolored sockets, darted among the tables until they landed on Harry, but when Morgio found Harry looking right at him, he quickly turned his face, contorted in a permanent scowl, away in obvious discomfort. Harry's eyes narrowed as he studied the man, long white fingers fidgeting and his slight smile nervous.

"Also," Dumbledore beckoned to the dark recesses behind the head table, drawing Harry's attention away from the new teacher, "I would like to introduce Sara Lemke. She will be Professor Trelawney's apprentice and will assist with Divination classes."

Sara, wearing a beautiful, lustrous deep purple robe, emerged from the shadows behind the head table with visible trepidation and bowed slightly before taking the empty chair next to Trelawney, smiling warmly at the enthusiastic welcome from the tables. Harry's heart sank as he glanced at the empty space next to him, which he'd saved for her.

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Dumbledore had more to say, but waited for silence to fall before he spoke. "Sara will also attend some classes with the seventh year students and though she has her own private quarters, she will be considered a Gryffindor for scheduling purposes. However, she will not earn points for her house. So, since there is nothing else I would like to discuss, I assume we're all hungry?" The old wizard clapped his hands once and held them out to encompass the four long tables. The feast materialized onto golden plates and platters and everyone dug in, the room erupting in conversation.

Harry kept his gaze on Sara, whose eyes roamed the tables, searching for him. Finally she found him and a wide smile broadened her face. She mouthed the words *'after we eat'* and Harry nodded his understanding.

Harry was ravenous and ate heartily; almost keeping up with Ron, but the meal seemed to take centuries. Dessert appeared and everyone lingered over puddings, cakes, and pies, spending more time chatting and less time eating. Harry was getting antsy, daydreaming about walking up to the head table, but no matter how he constructed the imagery it always ended the same, with everyone staring. Sara, it seemed, had also lost patience, for she appeared at Harry's side before the food was cleared and slid into the vacant spot. She hugged him and pecked his cheek.

Harry glanced at Neville and Seamus, who were staring open-mouthed and a modest grin touched his lips. People were always dazzled by Sara's beauty, liked her warm, easy smile and admired her charm and refined manor. It made Harry proud just to be in her company and the fact that she called herself his girlfriend was like winning the *Grand Prize* in the *Lottery of Significant Others*.

"I can't wait to give you a real kiss," she smiled, "I'd do it now, but we'll get in trouble. Hi guys!" She beamed at Ron and Hermione, "How was the train?"

"Long" Hermione answered.

"Boring," Ron said. "You'd think a wizarding school would have better transportation. Make the train a giant port key. That's what I say."

"Maybe you should bring it up to Professor Dumbledore. It's not a bad idea."

"Everyone could get in and then *bam!* Here we are." Ron continued shoveling apple pie into his mouth.

"He says that every year." Harry informed Sara.

The discussion was interrupted by Seamus, who once again blew up his drink. Sara discretely pointed a finger at his cup and muttered a few words under her breath.

"Hey!" Seamus brightened, his hair and face blackened by soot, "It worked!" He sipped the contents and wrinkled his nose. "Tastes a little charred, but it's rum alright!"

"Let me see!" Dean asked and held out his hand. He smelled the liquid in the cup and then took a cautious drink. "Seamus! You did it! And it only took seven years!" Dean took a big swig, grimaced, and handed it back. "You'll have to make some more later. But try not to burn it."

Harry leaned close to her ear, amused "Why'd you do that? He'll be blowing up his drink at *every* meal now."

"He lacks confidence, Harry. He needed a little boost."

"He *needs* his own fire brigade." Harry chuckled, "Sara, are you to sit with the teachers all the time?"

"No, just tonight. I hope you'll be saving me a seat again."

"I thought perhaps you'd like to sit with Malfoy off and on."

"I would, but since I'm a Gryffindor, I guess I'll have to sit with *you*. Pity." She smiled and took his hand under the table. "Will I be seeing you tonight?"

"As soon as I can get away."

"Don't be long, Harry."

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"I won't linger in the dorms, you can bet on that." Harry's smile warmed as he looked at her, "I can't wait to get away from all these prying eyes." he squeezed her hand under the table, "But tell me, who is this new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Morgio? What have you learned about him? He looks...*greasy*."

Ron and Hermione leaned in to listen.

"Not much so far. He's been on assignment with the Ministry looking for Voldemort for several years and has only recently returned. He claims never to have found him."

"Sounds boring, chasing after someone, year after year." Ron shook his head. "After a year or two you'd think he'd give up."

"*Really!*" Hermione agreed, "I imagine after that long I'd realize it wasn't going to plan."

"He has a bit of a hygiene problem if you ask me," Sara continued in a loud whisper, conspicuously waving a hand under her nose, wrinkled in distaste, "and he keeps *rodents* as pets! I saw him with one on his shoulder down in the dungeons when I was going to see Severus. It's downright creepy if you ask me."

Hermione grimaced. Ron shifted in his seat, embarrassed. Harry smiled amusedly at Ron, who he knew was remembering Scabbers.

"Have you talked with him much?" Harry wondered, suspiciously eyeing the new teacher. "What is he like?"

"He seems nice enough."

Ron narrowed his eyes suspiciously, "Which teacher would you think he's most likely to be friends with?"

Sara laughed. "That's easy. He and Severus get along famously. In fact, Morgio's quarters are in the dungeons." Ron, Hermione and Harry groaned, already dreading the start of classes.

"I don't see why," Hermione said in frustration, "They can't get *one* decent Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher!"

"They did." Ron added, "But he was a werewolf."

"I wonder what sort of menace this one will turn out to be?" Harry leered at Morgio.

"He'll be leaving at the end of the year, of course." Hermione agreed.

"They'll have *Lucius Malfoy* teaching it next year!" Ron grinned. Harry and Hermione laughed.

"Now you're not being fair!" Sara admonished, "Who knows, he might be a wonderfully interesting teacher."

"We'll see." Harry said, still studying the anxious wizard at the head table, his eyes distrustful.

* * *

"Stop, stop...*stop!*"

Harry reluctantly backed away, the frustration like a swift blow in the stomach. Sara breathed heavily and her eyes slid closed, trying to recover her senses, which had nearly taken their leave. Harry said nothing, hoping she would change her mind.

Sara sighed, leaning against the door to her rooms, still reeling from the hurricane that was their first kiss of the semester. "Harry, you're the devil." she whispered and opened her eyes to smile at him.

Harry grinned and felt the knot in his stomach untwist a little. "Suddenly I don't want to support your decision to wait."

"Me either!" She laughed, "Come on, Harry. Come sit with me."

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She led him into the bedroom and headed toward the sofa before the fireplace, but Harry veered toward her bed and, holding tight to her hand, tried to drag her there. Laughing and unable to overpower him, she dropped to the floor like a dead weight.

Harry grinned as he looked down at her and shrugged his shoulders. "Okay," he said and collapsed on top of her, "Anywhere is good."

Sara rolled him onto his back, sat on him, and set to tickling until their laughter rang out so that they didn't hear the knocks at the door.

"I think I'm going to be sick!" Harry managed through frantic laughter as her fingers dug into his ribs.

"Then that makes two of us, Potter."

Their laughter cut off like someone had flipped a switch marked *Silence*. Sara fell sideways onto the floor and Harry sat bolt upright as if an explosion had gone off in the next room. "Oh," he said, "It's just *you*."

"Who were you expecting, the Pope of Rome?" Snape snarled.

"Well, he probably smells better."

Sara turned her head and choked back laughter.

"Look Potter! There *is* a person in this world who finds you funny."

"Could you come back later? We're busy. Oh, and bring along some goblins to brighten up your visit."

"You're just *too cute*, aren't you, Potter."

"That's what your girlfriend says. Oh wait, you don't *haave*"

"SHUT-UP!"

"Were you here for some purpose other than uglying up the moment?"

"I wish I could say I'd come to toss you off the roof, but unfortunately, that's not the case. *Tonight*, anyway."

"You'd better get to the point, I'm falling asleep." Harry feigned a yawn and Sara kept giggling behind her hand. Harry couldn't help but smile, her laughter was infectious and he was still amused from being tickled and in a wonderful mood that even Snape couldn't muddy.

"Your insolence is about to get you in trouble, Potter, I suggest you wipe that stupid grin off your face and get up off the floor."

"Or what? You'll put me over your knee? Really, I think you'll find *Malfoy* down in the snake pit."

Sara burst into a violent fit of laughter, trying desperately to apologize to Snape through the midst of it.

"Ten points from Gryffindor."

"Ten points from Slytherin. You threatened to throw me off the roof."

"Fine." Snape almost grinned, "You want to call this tower neutral territory?"

"It already is. Outside this tower you're Professor Snape. But in here you're just *Severus*. The Great and Ugly."

"Get up. Now."

"Fine." Harry said, climbing to his feet through hitches of laughter, "But *Severus*, you can bat your eyes all you like, but this is a private party and *those shoes* are all wrong anyway..."

Snape swatted Harry's head with a sharp *slap!* "I said shut-up, you miserable little pest. I've about had it with..."

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Slap! Quick as lightning Harry swatted Snape's head and grimaced at his hand. "You'd think the *Potions Master* could whip up a little shampoo..."

Snape shoved Harry, who shoved right back, grinning like mad and trying to restrain himself from slapping Snape's head every few seconds. "*Really* *Severus*, those shoes..."

Harry suddenly found himself yanked up by his shirt and traveling backward through the doors to the roof.

No longer laughing and on her feet, Sara threw out her hand and yelled something in Latin.

Harry landed softly on his back, snug in a giant feather pillow, which had materialized out of nowhere. Sara was already by his side, her face full of worry, but Harry was grinning. Jumping to his feet as if with glee, he grabbed her around the waist and gave her a loud kiss. "Thanks honey!" He gently pushed her aside as Snape came scowling through the doors after him.

Harry smiled with relish and delight at the Potions Professor, the *full face* sort of smile one sees on someone who just found out that they've won a million pounds. "So *Severus*," Harry said his name like it was the *silliest* name he'd ever heard, "shall we draw our wands? Or should I just beat the crap out of you? After all, you *know how to stop the bleeding*."

"Ever the barbarian, Potter. *Wizards* don't resort to *physical* -"

Slap!

"-alright that's it."

Snape chanced a swing and skimmed the blow off Harry's forehead. Harry, having jerked his head out of the way almost in time, swung full force, connected with Snape's eye, then reeled from a hard blow to the cheek. Harry launched himself at Snape's shoulders, knocking him to the ground where Harry pummeled him until he found himself the one being pummeled. A knee to Snape's stomach solved that problem.

Snape rolled onto his side, clenching his middle and struggling to breathe, having had the wind knocked out of him.

Harry's smile returned. He was enjoying this, had envisioned it a thousand times, but the satisfaction of knocking Snape around was more rewarding than he'd ever imagined. He felt twice his size and *invigorated*. "Get up," he laughed, "Or are you too *old* and *pathetic* to handle Harry Potter?"

"*Harry what's WRONG with you?!! Severus! Stop it, BOTH of you!*"

Snape rolled onto his knees and stood. "I could best you on my worst day, *Potter!*" he nearly spat this last. Blood flowed from his lip, his eye was almost swollen shut, but he wasn't ready to give up.

"Good." Harry smiled, "Let's see you try." Harry barely noticed Sara yelling at him, at *them*, screaming actually, and Snape didn't seem to hear at all. He grabbed one of Sara's patio chairs and flung it hard at Harry's head. It was meant to distract him long enough for Snape to lunge, but with a gesture the chair spun in midair, reversed trajectory, and crashed hard into Snape. He threw up his hands and batted the chair aside, but not before receiving a few fresh wounds which had already begun to swell. A moment later they were throwing punches again, landing most, and found themselves on the ground once more, rolling around in a struggle, fists flying.

"*STUPIDIFY!*" A voice like thunder cracked the air.

Suddenly, the fight was over. Harry and Snape fell flat and lay motionless on the cold stone roof of the tower. Dumbledore stepped off his flying carpet and summoned Sara. "Come, help me separate them."

Relieved, Sara pointed at Harry. "*Wingardium Leviosa*."

When they were far enough apart so that they couldn't start right in again, Dumbledore held out his hands. "*Enervate*."

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Harry slung an arm around Snape's shoulders. "All in good sport, sir. I guess we got a little carried away."

"Right," said Snape, smiling and letting a hand come to rest on Harry's shoulder, "I just meant to show Potter some defense procedures. Sorry to have woken you, Headmaster. My deepest apologies"

"Sara woke me." Dumbledore frowned, "That was some show you two were putting on. I might expect an enormous lack of self-control from a teenager, but certainly not from a *Hogwarts Professor*, Severus. That doesn't mean I'm not equally disappointed in *you*, Harry. Frankly, I'm quite surprised to see such ungentlemanly behavior from either of you and in front of a young lady!"

"Sir," Harry volunteered, taking a step forward, "I'm sure neither one of us meant to scare Sara. At least *I* didn't."

"I certainly didn't intend to frighten her." Snape offered, "And as you can see, we're both fine."

"*Fine?*" Sara asked angrily, "Have you bothered to look at yourselves? At each other?"

Harry and Snape looked upon the other and both cracked a swollen grin. "Professor," Harry chuckled, "You look like the Elephant Man in black and blue."

"And you look like a mutant eggplant, Potter."

There was a moment of silence, and then the two of them burst into wild laughter. Dumbledore and Sara looked confused.

"To the infirmary with *both* of you. Madam Pomfrey will shrink the swelling, but I think the two of

you will be healing your bruises the old fashioned way." Dumbledore ordered, "And Severus, I expect you in my office first thing in the morning. Harry, I'll see you after breakfast. You're to relate this little mishap to *no one*." He gave Harry a stern glance. "Now go, and if you decide to continue these...lessons, in the halls, you'll both find yourselves sprawled on the front walk."

"Yes sir." Harry muttered, "I'm very sorry about this."

Snape just nodded his head and lowered his eyes.

* * *

It was quiet in the castle at dawn and Harry found he rather enjoyed roaming the halls while everyone slept. Well, he wasn't exactly *roaming*, only going from Sara's tower to his own and it wasn't that far, but he liked it just the same. He no longer tried to be sneaky as he had last year, didn't even bother with his cloak. He took his time, like he had all the business in the world being up and about in his pajamas and barefoot. Expecting to be greeted by the sound of four boys snoring, Harry was surprised at the silence that met him as he slid into the room. It was odd, he thought. If he couldn't see their sleeping forms behind the curtains, he'd have thought the place was deserted.

He had crossed more than half the room when he noticed the lid of his trunk was open, his belongings scattered around it. Some of his books lay open, hastily thrown to the floor. The new forest green sweater Ron's mum had knitted him was sticking out from under Seamus' bed as if it had been kicked in frustration. Clothes had been obviously unfolded and shaken, then thrown to the side. His Pocket Sneak-o-scope, the one Ron had sent him from Egypt, lay smashed on the floor like an afterthought. Fury rose in him at the sight of this. *Incensed* him, actually. A *gift* from a far away and exotic place! And from Ron, his *best friend*! A *birthday* gift!

A sense of dread settled over him, quickly veering toward terrified anxiety. His breath caught uneasy in his throat and his stomach tightened as he slammed the lid of the trunk, then nearly tore it off its hinges opening it back up.

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The air rushed from his lungs in a sigh of relief. The second chamber of his trunk, created illegally in his bedroom at the Dursley's, was perfectly undisturbed. Sara's birthday gift, wrapped in colorful wizard paper, remained unharmed. (serpentes and confetti still drifted and curled around cakes with flickering candles. Even the bright, shiny bow was unrumpled.) Harry removed the heavy box, placed it on the floor, and set to rummaging around in the bottom of his trunk. Again he began to get nervous, but then his fingers brushed against velvet. He grasped the tiny box and pulled it out, opening it, needing to see with his own eyes that it was still there.

Snapping the velvet box shut and slipping it in his pocket, Harry went to Ron's bed, then Neville's.

Finally, he stood amid the room, feeling helpless and frightened, glancing from bed to bed until his eyes landed on the desk. He hurried over and composed a note with a shaky hand.

Professor Dumbledore,

I know it's early and you have a meeting with Snape this morning, but you need to come to my room right away. I think you should look at Ron, Seamus, Dean and Neville. They are alive, but are unnaturally quiet. And they won't wake up.

Also, someone has rifled through my belongings, though nothing seems to be missing.

Harry

Hedwig, half asleep and hooting in protest, sensed Harry's anxiety and flew off with the letter at once.

Harry tried again to rouse his roommates. He went from bed to bed, shaking them, slapping their faces, yelling as loud as he dared, even trying to sit them up. It was no use. It was an obvious spell, but no matter how he channeled his will into his wand, *Enervate* just wasn't working. Neither was *Finite*. He was beyond worried. They should have snapped awake with either spell breaker and the looks on their faces, well, they looked silently horrified.

An idea gripped Harry and he bolted out of the room, down the stairs, and across the common room where he stepped onto a large book and levitated himself up yet another flight of stairs and into the Girls dormitory. For this he could be heavily punished, even expelled since they were all in bed, but he felt sure Dumbledore would understand his need.

Hermione opened her eyes grudgingly, then understanding took hold of her and she was alert in an instant and throwing back the covers. Harry held out a robe and she followed him without a word back to the boys' dorms. She needn't ask questions. She knew by the look on his face that something was wrong with Ron. It was urgent, but Hermione didn't panic. Whatever it was though, it was important enough for Harry to come into a room full of girls at the crack of dawn and pull her from her bed. Fear touched the back of her throat and she pushed past Harry, who was practically running already.

The dark had already lifted with the silver half-light of dawn, but Hermione flicked her wand absently at the candles anyway, filling the shadows with warm gold. She leaned over Ron in his bed, her wand at the ready. Harry set to shaking Neville again. Neville's brow was furrowed and his whimper was so soft he could barely be heard. The misery on his face was too easily read. He looked to Hermione, desperate.

"How long have they been like this?"

"I've only been here about ten minutes."

"*Enervate!*"

"That won't work."

"*Finite!*"

"Neither will that."

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"Let's both try."

Harry stepped to Ron's other side and directed his wand at his friend's chest. Hermione did the same.

"Ready?" She asked.

Harry nodded.

"*Enervate!*"

Nothing happened.

Harry indicated they try again.

"*Finite!*" They said in unison and leaned back to see if it worked. Ron slept as he had before. A pained look was about him and Harry felt even more helpless. Hermione was becoming a bit frazzled he saw and knew she was racking her brain for even one shred of information that might wake the boys, some snippet of a lecture, a fact read in a book, or old folklore. Her countenance displayed her frustration, telling Harry she was coming up empty.

"Harry," she said with a shaky voice, "this is Dark Magic. Get Dumbledore."

"No need Miss Granger." Dumbledore said from the doorway, "Dark Magic you say?"

Hermione sidestepped to the head of the bed to give the Headmaster access to Ron's sleeping form.

Snape appeared beside him.

"Harry and I tried to wake him together. Nothing works."

"I've never seen a spell like this." Dumbledore admitted, "And he appears to be having a terrible nightmare. Just look at the boy."

"I don't think it's a spell." Hermione offered, "I think it's a potion."

At the mention of a potion Snape, who had been surveying the other beds, pushed Harry out of the way and leaned over Ron. "The other boys are having nightmares as well. Dark circles around the eyes. Pronounced pallor. Body temperatures are significantly lowered." He laid a hand on Ron's brow.

"Weasley here is cold, too. You said *both* of you tried to wake him? Simultaneously?" He glanced at Hermione, who nodded, looking grave. "It's The Draught of the Living Dead." He said. "But the nightmares are troubling. Not normal at all."

"Isn't that illegal?" Harry asked before he could stop himself. Of course, he knew the answer to the question.

Hermione tossed off a bit of knowledge, just out of habit. "People were being buried alive all the time."

"*All* Dark Magic is illegal, Potter. A future auror should know these things."

"Shall I get Madam Pomfrey?" inquired Dumbledore, whose eyes had gone serious and utterly unreadable. The ever-present sparkle was gone. Harry had seen the look before and it could mean any number of things, none of them good. At the very least, Harry thought, the Headmaster was worried. They will need to be moved to the hospital wing, but they're fine for now. Fortunately, there is a counter-potion, but it will take a day to brew."

"*Tomorrow!*" Hermione gasped.

"If we're *lucky*," Snape said, his voice lowering. "You see, as simple as the Draught is to make, its cure requires many ingredients, a few of which I do not have. I'll need to make a trip to Diagon Alley."

"This won't wear off?" Dumbledore inquired.

"A standard Drought would last two days. This appears stronger. It could be a week, maybe more. Also we have to consider that, with the scale of the nightmares they seem to be experiencing, they could be mad by then, or at least irrevocably changed."

Harry and Hermione shared a nervous glance.

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"In that case, you're excused from our meeting until this current situation has been handled, Severus. I will arrange for someone to teach your classes."

Snape bowed his head at the old wizard before turning on his heel.

"Harry," Dumbledore beckoned, taking a seat on Harry's bed, "I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Of course."

"Miss Granger?"

"Yes sir?" Harry was dismayed when she addressed Dumbledore with her back to him, her voice slightly choked and shaking with her attempts at control, her left hand was intent on straightening the curtains, and her right discretely wiped her eyes.

"Your young Mr. Weasley will be perfectly fine. Believe me when I say Severus Snape is infinitely knowledgeable on Potions and will take good care of your friends."

Hermione nodded and quickly left the room. Harry's heart sank and he fought the urge to run after her. He turned and Dumbledore was waiting for him. Harry took a deep breath and took the velvet box out of his pocket.

* * *

"Snape tells me you're an exceptional student." The unpleasant, haggard new teacher smiled at the tall, impeccable boy who's platinum hair stood out in the torchlight like warm gossamer. They stood together in the dungeons, having met in the hall.

"I'm glad I've earned his good opinion." Draco smiled.

"You know, I could use an assistant, just for a little...uh... *experiment* I have going."

"I'd be happy to help, Professor." Malfoy gave the older man his usual cold smile.

"You'd...uh...it would have to be in the strictest confidence."

Draco's eyes lit up at the thought of clandestine experiments and a little of the frost melted from his smile. "All things *worth doing* have to be kept in the strictest confidence, Professor."

"That is certainly true, but what I need will be next to impossible to get. You could be expelled."

Malfoy's smile widened. "I think something that risky puts me in a position to make one demand."
"I wouldn't peg you for a quick pay-off. You've too much integrity for that. You want me to owe you a favor."

"I like you, Morgio. You think like a Malfoy." Draco said, relaxing in the teacher's presence, "My father would like you, too."

"I met Lucius once. He is also a man of great integrity, Draco. You should be proud."

Draco coughed to cover an escaping laugh. "Yeah. Something like that. Now what do you need from me?"

"Oh yes, the matter at hand." Morgio wrung his long, bony fingers, "I need a vial blood from Harry Potter."

"What?" Malfoy reeled a bit, "Why do you need *that*?"

"Why should it matter? I understand he's no friend of yours."

"It *matters* because I'm not doing it unless you tell me."

Morgio sighed. "Very well then. Come to my office."

* * *

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"Very impressive, Harry" Dumbledore closed the box and handed it back, capturing Harry's hand and holding it, the box crushed between their palms. "The fact that you have such intensions pleases me more than you could know."

Harry smiled as his hand dropped to his side, shoving the box back into his pocket. "I just wanted to have it, I guess. I don't know when I'll give it to her."

"Does she know?"

"No."

"Does anyone?"

"Just the Dursleys. Ron doesn't even know."

"Good. And Harry, It would certainly be best to wait, at least until you are done with classes."

"I doubt it would be the right time before then, anyway."

"Were you planning a long engagement? Or will the two of you be running off together do you think?"

Harry smiled. "At least a year or two. We're still young, sir."

"That you are. And did I just hear Severus Snape say you were planning to become an Auror? I'd forgotten you had such ambitions."

"I don't know." Harry sighed, looking puzzled, "I'll be getting a muggle job as soon as possible, but I still need to continue my wizard training. The Ministry offers Auror classes. It sounds interesting enough."

"Harry Potter of all wizards should not be planning his future around the Ministry's *schedule of classes*! You would make an excellent Auror, but is it really what you want?"

"You've said it yourself, sir. It's in my nature to go looking for trouble. I was thinking of dragging Ron along, too."

"I think the world has something else to offer Mr. Weasley. Ron is an extraordinary chess player. It shows he has clarity of thought and a good mind for strategy. I was planning to recommend him for the Wizard Secret Society."

"I didn't know there was a Wizard Secret Society!"

"Hence the name." Dumbledore grinned and Harry felt stupid. "He's seen too much excitement by your side, been up close too many times. Ron could never be behind-the-scenes now, any more than Miss Granger could. I think it's a side effect of being a friend of yours."

"Ron is fiercely courageous." Harry sighed as he regarded Ron asleep in his bed and thought *This is what it means to be my friend*. "He could be anything."

"I agree. And the level of commitment he has shown in *being* your friend has made him a stronger person and a better wizard than he likely would have been, had he never met you. Harry, the sacrifices we make reward us in their own time." Dumbledore raised his eyes, understanding the look of guilt on Harry's face. "After all, did living with your Aunt and Uncle teach you nothing?"

"It taught me that there are people in the world who will lie to me. Who will despise me for what I am with no regard for the *person* I am. I know how it feels to be unloved and alone. To not belong."

"Yet here you are. Kind, compassionate, humble. In possession all the best human qualities. You, Harry, who always does what is right, no matter what it costs you. You take nothing for granted. You're honest and full of integrity." Dumbledore admitted, "I struggled with my decision to place you with the Dursleys before I realized I had no decision to make. As hard as it was to put you outside the world to which you belong, depriving you of blood relations was hardly the right thing to do."

Harry was incredulous. "How did you know I wouldn't become angry, broken and degenerate?"

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"I didn't. Evidently, we got lucky. Harry, no truly good thing is easy. Imagine if you'd grown up with our kind? People flocking around you, putting you on a pedestal every day of your life. Had you lived *that* life, we'd have *two* Draco Malfoys at Hogwarts."

Harry lowered his eyes, knowing the Headmaster was right. He'd hated living with the Dursleys, but he hated the idea of dealing with fame before he could walk even more.

Harry cracked a smile. "*Two* Malfoys? Sara would likely pull her hair out."

"She certainly *does not* have a high opinion of Mister Malfoy."

"She loathes him. She literally spit in his face, yet he persists."

"Did you buy the ring to spite him?" The twinkle was back in the old wizard's eyes.

"No. It's just an added bonus that I rather like."

"Do you think this might be an attempt to sabotage your plans?"

"Like I said, my best friend doesn't even know. How could it be?"

"You think they were after something else."

"I'm not sure. It's a birthday gift for Sara. I really don't know much about it." Harry gathered up the package without being asked and carefully removed the wrapping with his wand so it could be rewrapped later. He set the globe on his night table.

"It was really expensive," he announced, "I guess anyone who was able to turn up *here* is a wizard and a wizard would have little use for this," he indicated his pocket.

Dumbledore looked up from the crystal ball with serious eyes. "Whatever you paid, it was certainly a bargain if this is what I think it is. Of course, I couldn't know for sure until it's been examined. These markings, they aren't familiar, but then I never was an expert on such things."

"What do you think it is?"

"A very powerful object. Meant for one person and one person alone. I wonder how it happened to find its way to her through you?"

"I saw it in Diagon Alley. We were shopping for dress robes."

"Then Sara brought you there?"

"Yes, but I think she was drawn more to the window displays. She never even glanced at this. It jumped out at me and I knew it was perfect for her. It was too expensive, so I left without it."

"But you went back because it would not leave your mind?"

"Yeah, something like that."

At that point Hermione rushed into the room and came to an abrupt halt. "I'm so sorry, Professor! I thought you'd already gone. I was just coming to check on Ron. See if he'd been moved yet. Is *that* what I think it is?" Hermione did not wait to be invited over. "I can't believe it." She exclaimed, running a finger lightly over the largest of the symbols, the one Harry had thought looked familiar.

"Can you read it, my dear?"

"No. It's terribly ancient, but I recognize this one. It's on the cover of Sara's spell book. She told us it was the old Gypsy symbol for Elemental. Look here. Four smaller shapes bound together to make one. Earth, wind, fire, water. This is the Orb of Arassel."

"Your cleverness and knowledge never cease to surprise me, Miss Granger."

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"I've been doing research on Elementals all summer, trying to find a way to help Sara. I found only one mention of the Orb in a very old and obscure book called *Diviners and Their Devices*. I found in Ron's house of all places. They didn't even know they *had* it!" She rolled her eyes as if to say *how ridiculous!* "It said that this has been lost for centuries and was believed to have been destroyed. It was last seen in the 1600's in the possession of a gypsy named Lanva who had the powers. She and the Orb disappeared and were never seen again."

"Ron's family didn't remember owning this book?"

"No."

"That also is interesting." Dumbledore stroked his beard in consideration.

"Perhaps the Orb *wanted* to be found?" Harry ventured. "And someone wanted to make sure we found out what it was?"

"Possible. Very possible. However, *someone* knows you have it. I'll have to take this for a time, Harry. It will be safe with me."

"But Sara's birthday is in *two days!*"

"I want to run some tests on it before it goes to Sara. You shall have it back in time I expect. I feel no menace from it, but better safe than sorry." Dumbledore placed the Orb of Arassel back in its box and tucked it under his arm as he stood. "Harry, this Orb belongs to her already. I have no right to keep it from her."

Harry nodded, terrified that come Saturday, he would have no gift for Sara.

"Miss Granger?"

"Yes Professor?"

"Would you be willing to continue your research?"

"Of course!" Hermione's face lit up like a Hogwarts Christmas tree.

"I will arrange for you to have full access to the restricted section and you will be excused from classes today."

"I'll send an owl if I find anything, sir."

"Good. We all have something to do, then."

"What about me?" Harry asked, feeling quite useless.

"Oh yes, Harry. I forgot about you. You have a Potions class to teach."

"What? *ME?*"

"They're *underclassmen*, Harry. You'll find Severus' lesson books in his office."

Harry was too astonished to argue as Dumbledore turned his back to the room and left with Hermione in tow. How could he, Harry Potter, possibly *teach a class?*

Taking out his wand, he returned everything to his trunk and tried several spells on the Sneak-o-scope, which was beyond repair, finally dusting the pieces into a box and, scowling, dumped it into the trash. Did he have to wear his school robes? Sara only had to wear hers if she was attending one of her classes. As an apprentice she could dress as she liked. Deciding it probably didn't matter, he found a pair of black slacks from Harvey Nichols, Italian shoes of fine, soft leather and an expensive green vneck

sweater Sara loved him to wear. He thought it made him look like he went shopping with Draco Malfoy. She said it made him look *sharp*, not to mention *oozing class and impeccable taste*. Then of course, there was *handsome* and his favorite, *dangerously green-eyed*.

For his birthday this year Hermione had sent him a silver comb charmed to neaten his hair. It was a charm she had devised just for him and it was inscribed along the spine.

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*Sleek and shine, to look divine,
thy teeth will turn to tufts so fine.
Unruly locks, such fuss and bother,
depart the hair of Harry Potter.*

He used it now, his hair silkening and falling into place, glancing in the mirror at the beds behind him, wishing he could wake Ron up and tell him he was *teaching a class*. Ron would want to know. Hell, he'd be even more excited than Harry himself was. Ron would also want to know that he'd gotten into a fistfight with Snape on the roof and that it had been broken up by the Headmaster himself. Now *that* was news.

Turning away from the reflected image of him with a split lip and an ugly black eye, Harry crossed the room and sat next to Ron's sleeping form. "Hey Ron." He said, studying his friend's face for any sign of recognition, "I'm going to teach Snape's classes today. He's gone off to get some ingredients for your counter-potion. You'll be *just fine*."

"He will, dear." Madam Pomfrey called as she moved stretchers into the room with her wand, "but he can't hear a thing you're saying."

"I know." Harry sighed and got up, "I guess it didn't matter."

"Sometimes it doesn't, Harry."

Harry thought it best to get out of her way, so he laid a warm hand across Ron's cold forehead and tried to smile. "Hang in there." He said and left, grabbing a handsome emerald green robe from the foot of his bed and calling to Hedwig, who quickly perched on his shoulder.

As he emerged from the portrait hole, he was taken off guard by Professor McGonagall, rushing toward him, her face peaked with worry. All at once she stopped, as if she had suddenly and completely forgotten where it was she was going. The smile that warmed her sharp features was full of fondness. "Harry." She said softly, "You're all grown up! I can't believe I hadn't noticed it yesterday. How *different* you look! Last spring you left a child and now you've utterly changed in just a few weeks. You look splendid, Harry."

Harry was blushing all the way to his toes. "Th-Thank you, Professor."

"I've just seen Albus. Has there been any change with the boys?"

"No. Madam Pomfrey is moving them to the hospital wing now."

"Good, then, I should go and help her. Harry, you will make a fine teacher today. And a *well dressed* one at that. That color suits you perfectly." Harry felt suddenly unconfident and he looked at her with nervous eyes. She patted his shoulder, the one that wasn't taken up by Hedwig. "If you need any help, send your owl."

"Thank you, Professor."

She gave him one last encouraging smile before disappearing behind the portrait.

Harry took a deep breath and made for the dungeons.

* * *

Hermione kept her eyes on what she was doing so she wouldn't have to lie to the faces of her fellow Gryffindors, who peppered her with questions about the five boys who were so obviously missing from the table.

"It's some sort of sleeping potion. I don't know what they intended it to be, but it's landed them all in the infirmary." She said as she piled buttered toast with raspberry preserves into a large linen napkin.

"They'll be fine, of course, but Snape had to go to Diagon Alley to get something to reverse it, so Harry's teaching his class."

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"HARRY POTTER?? Is teaching Snape's Potions class??" Asked a wide-eyed Lavender Brown, who Hermione noticed was wearing too much make-up and had the top two buttons of her blouse undone, the crimson and gold striped tie loosened. Her robe wasn't done-up and flared out to either side, hanging loosely on her shoulders as she reclined against the back of her chair. Next to her sat Parvati Patil, who was dressed similarly, but with even more horrible make-up. The cloud of perfume around them was enough to choke a flubberworm.

Hermione had the full attention of about twenty of her house-mates and more heads turned as the news made its way down the table like a ripple from a skipped stone.

"Harry just happened to be standing there when the need arose. All he really has to do is teach a bunch of 2nd and 3rd years how to make a few simple potions."

"Snape is gonna have a bloody *cow!*" laughed Liam Seever, who was a chaser on Harry's team and a sixth year.

"I know," Hermione smiled, folding the gold napkin around her breakfast and lifting a big glass of spiced pumpkin juice. *Good Luck, Harry* she thought and made her way back toward the library.

"I've got to *see this!*" Lavender grinned the moment Hermione turned away and two chairs scrape the floor.

Hermione smiled to herself. *Harry, she thought, the Hoochie Patrol is on its way.*

The library was a ghost town. Literally. Nearly Headless Nick sat at a far table, leaning over a book, his head now and then tipping off. The Grey Lady of Ravenclaw sat directly across, perusing a very

large tome. They were the only souls present with the exception of Madam Pince, who was quickly before her, holding out a skeleton key on a long chain.

"You're to wear this at all times. On the outside *only* if you're in the library. At night you're to lock it in this box." She produced a small gold cube from the folds of her robes, along with the words to open and lock the box on a small scrap of paper. Hermione tucked them into her bag and slipped the chain around her neck.

"Thank you."

"You should be very proud, young lady. The Headmaster must trust you *implicitly*. Full access to the Restricted Section is a very rare privilege that hasn't been extended to *any* student in more than fifty years. Mark my words; there is knowledge in those books that is pure poison to the mind. Take care with what you read, Miss Granger. I mean that."

"Of course." Hermione smiled. She had no intensions of studying up on evil curses.

The old Librarian gave her a mixed smile before retreating to her office and Hermione found the most isolated table to drop her bag on.

With her notebook open and a quill at the ready, Hermione pulled out *Diviners and Their Devices*, laying it aside. Her bag she moved to the floor, propped against a table leg but still within easy reach. Her eyes moved from the locked area across the room to the key around her neck, a beautifully sculpted copy cut in bright yellow gold, light playing brilliantly off it as it lay on her open palm. The thing she had most coveted since she'd first walked through the doors as an eleven year old girl.

Knowledge. Unlimited access to it.

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9. Blood & Trust

"Hello Hedwig!" Sara smiled at Harry's bird, "What have you got for me?"

Hedwig dropped a single sheet of paper, circled once, and came to rest on Sara's shoulder. Sara petted a wing before reading the note.

Sara,

It's a long story, but Ron and the rest of my roomies are in the hospital wing. It's a sleeping potion, but they will be alright. Snape had to go get something for the counter-potion and I'm teaching his class today. (Ugh!!!)

I didn't want you to worry when I'm missing from History of Magic. I have to find lesson plans now, so I'll see you at lunch I guess.

I love you!

Harry

"Harry?" She asked the owl, "*Is teaching Potions?*" I wonder how *Severus* feels about that?" Sara's smile broke into an amused laugh, remembering them rolling around on her roof last night, beating each other up. She thought of the grins on their faces as they'd punched each other and hoped they'd gotten whatever it was out of their systems. Perhaps they would be able to tolerate each other's presence for awhile. If not, she thought she'd soon be pulling her hair out.

"Let's go wish Harry good luck, Hedwig." She said and tucked something into the pocket of a deep purple robe. "I've got a few minutes. And I can return you to him personally."

* * *

"Harry! You look... *good*. Even with all those cuts and bruises. In fact, they make you look even better." Lavender smiled thoughtfully, considering him in his fine clothes.

"Thanks." Harry said, smiled weakly and thought *clown seductresses*. He'd never really liked the two girls who had just wandered into the empty Potions classroom. "What brings *you* here?"

"Hermione told us. We *had* to see it for ourselves! *Professor Harry Potter*. I always thought you were intelligent, Harry." Lavender drew closer.

Harry saw them advance and fought the feeling to back away. "I'll have to thank Hermione when I see her." He said, trying to keep his attention on the lesson plans open on the desk, though his eyes were unwillingly drawn to the third button of Lavender's blouse. Suddenly, he found the sight irritating and dragged his gaze away.

"You'll want to fix your clothes before you lose points for Gryffindor."

"We'll just pretend we didn't hear that." Patty smirked, delighted by the fact that he'd noticed. "But tell me Harry, what have you done? You look so...*attractive*. I'd never noticed before. And your eyes. They're so..."

"*Green*." Lavender finished, drawing very close to Harry until she'd squeezed herself between him and the desk, which she reclined against. Harry thought Lavender and Patty were repellant and hoped they were planning to leave soon. However, it was quite plain that they were just warming up.

"What are you doing?" He asked Lavender coldly, "You're sitting on Snape's lesson plans!"

Lavender smiled and Harry noticed Patty Patil was standing next to him, so close he could hear her breathing, her hand on his arm. Mostly he was revolted, but the hopelessly male part of him wanted to know what happened next. He was unable to move, wedged between two rather pretty girls, his mind racing, trying to find an excuse to get away from the rouge-laden vixens.

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"Sorry to interrupt." Came a voice from the doorway.

Three heads turned and there was Sara, Hedwig perched on her shoulder, her long blonde hair falling into loose curls at her waist, the black streak only an inch wide. Her blue eyes looked violet next to her purple satin robe and Harry breathed relief at the sight of her.

"*Sara!*" He said and nearly shoved Patty out of his way. Hedwig flew off to find a perch and Harry

hugged Sara tightly. "Save me." he whispered in her ear. She kissed him sweetly on the lips as Lavender and Patty glared murderously. "Harry dear, who are your friends?"

"Lavender and Patty. They share a room with Hermione."

He turned to his fellow Gryffindors, who he thought looked like absolute trash next to Sara, and introduced her as his girlfriend. Their reception was cold, but polite.

"Sara, I'm so sorry about last night."

"Don't worry about it." She smiled sweetly, and barely touched his bruised cheek, "It's over now. All's well, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Their eyes were locked and both completely forgot the two girls who stood watching.

"Who does she think she is?" Lavender whispered to her friend, "She just got here yesterday! We've known him for years!"

"Tramp." Patti scowled, "I'll bet she's a fake blonde."

"I brought you something, Harry." Sara searched for an obscure pocket, "Here it is." she placed the object in his hand.

"What is it?" he asked, curiously examining a glass ball full of swirling purple mist, "What does it do?"

"It's a Confidall. It holds a bit of my confidence. Keep it in your pocket. If you get nervous or anxious just touch it and you'll feel better instantly."

"I feel better already." He smiled into her eyes, slipping her confidence into his pocket.

"That's because you're touching the Confidall."

"Maybe, maybe not." he smiled and she blushed a little "Good luck today, Sara. And make Treelawny open a window. She keeps it hot enough for a person to faint. Oh, girls, I forgot you were there. Um, would you excuse us?"

"Yeah, see you later *Harry*." Lavender said, a bit of venom in her voice.

"Nice meeting you." Patty smirked at Sara, in much the same tone.

Sara smiled humorously, trying hard not to giggle until they were out of sight. "I think they were about to attack you."

"Thanks for saving me." Harry smiled, "I can't stand them."

"They look like prostitutes." She whispered, although they were alone. "And they seem to like *you*, Harry."

"They like pretty much anyone who doesn't look good in a dress. Last year Hermione said they were flirting heavily with Nearly Headless Nick!"

"A ghost? Oh my. Perhaps I should have given the Confidall to *them*. It sounds like they need it more than you do."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that. I'm scared to death."

"You? *Fearless* Captain Potter? You'll see, Harry. You'll be fine."

"I hope so."

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"Harry, what's wrong with Ron?"

Harry related the story, saying he had no idea what the intruder was looking for and downplaying the seriousness of the Drought of the Living Dead, leaving out the nightmares entirely, and ending with Hermione being excused from classes to do research for Dumbledore.

"I have a few minutes before History of Magic, so I'll come see how you're doing."

"Good." He smiled lovingly at her, "I'll see you then. You're going to be late for your first class."

Sara glanced at an elegant diamond-encrusted gold watch and horror invaded her countenance. "I'd better *run*!" She gave him a fierce hug, pecked his cheek, and ran from the room.

* * *

"He never went back to his dorm! I sat in the Gryffindor common room half the night! I had to get *some* sleep before classes today, you know, I have a schedule to keep. Anyway, by 1:30 he still hadn't come back, so I went up to his room. Weasley and the others were there, but there were pillows stuffed under Harry's sheets. I went to bed."

"*The common room?*" Morgio asked, surprise animating his face, "However did you manage *that*? How on Earth did you get in?"

"Easy. I stole a Gryffindor robe out of the Prefects bathroom, followed some first years through the portrait hole and hid where I had a good vantage point. I could see everyone who went in and out. I got quite an earful, too. You wouldn't believe what those people do over the summer."

"He must have been visiting the girl last night." Morgio paused, hand stroking his stubbly chin.

At the mention of Harry's girlfriend, Draco pictured her as she'd been last night, breathtaking as she smiled from the head table, attired in clothing that appealed to his love of fine things. He recalled watching after dinner as she showered her affection on Harry Potter, and the happiness on her face as she did so was somewhat crushing. But he now knew her name. Sara Lemke. He hadn't stopped thinking of her since he'd seen her at The Phantom and as her name echoed through his mind a new image floated into view. Something he had forgotten. Song, lovely and soft, drifting to his ears, and her, standing in the moonlight, a gentle breeze stirring her gossamer hair. A long, white silk nightgown brushing her skin and a midnight purple velvet cape tied across her delicate shoulders.

And what is your name? You still haven't told me.

It's Sara. Now goodnight, Mr. Malfoy.

Ugh! She hated him!

Something tightened in his chest as he remembered her in the hallway, how he'd longed to kiss her, how her perfume had weakened his knees. How he thought he would die if she walked away from him. And then the painful spell she'd cast, dropping him to the floor. He'd never seen anything like it and was suddenly very afraid of her.

A *memory charm*, he thought, *they made me forget about her*. It explained why, when he saw her in the club, he'd been so compelled by her. The frightened look in her eyes had confused him and he'd demanded to know who she was and why she was so familiar. Then she'd tried to run and he'd felt that same desperation again. He'd pushed her against the wall, trying his best to convince her he meant no harm. And then there was Potter, hitting him in the face.

"Is uh...everything alright?" Morgio asked.

"Huh? Oh, um, yes. I've behaved *dreadfully*. I think I have an apology to make." Draco said and stood, "I'll get you your blood."

"Good. Time is running very short, Draco. Speaking of time, we'd better get to our classes. We don't want to draw attention to ourselves just now."

* * *

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Harry started to shake as he panned the many pairs of eyes, all of which were trained on him, waiting for him to do something. He took a deep breath, squeezed the Confidall, and smiled at the first-years. "I'm Harry Potter." He said and waited through the usual rash of awestruck whispers, once again feeling on display, then continued. "Professor Snape, the Potions Master, is gone on urgent business today and so you're all stuck with me."

Hushed laughter brought smiles to the faces of the pint-sized Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws and Harry relaxed, smiling himself.

"I'm a seventh year student and I've never taught a class before so don't be afraid to ask questions."

A hand went up.

"Yes?"

A mousy little freckle-faced boy stood sheepishly. "Can we see your scar, Professor Potter?"

Harry laughed and pushed his hair back. Curious wide eyed children leaned in for a better look.

"There. And don't call me 'Professor'."

Another hand went up. A girl who looked quite a bit like Cho Chang smiled and rose to her feet. "Mr. Potter,"

"It's Harry. I'm a fellow student, remember." He smiled as she blushed scarlet.

"Harry, are you planning to kill He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named?"

"You mean *Voldemort*?"

The class gasped collectively. "Yes. *Him*."

"I'm not planning to kill *anyone*. I don't know if I *can* kill him. I'm not sure anyone could." Harry considered this for a moment, "I don't know what will happen."

Harry took out the lesson plans and Snape's attendance book and took a quick roll call. With everyone accounted for, he dove into teaching his first class.

"Professor Snape will tell you that Potion-making is an exact art. He is correct, for even the smallest mistake will alter your brew." Harry smiled at the memory this conjured up, "I once had a friend mistake a cat hair for a humans while attempting to mix a Polyjuice Potion. She did a stretch in the infirmary afterwards. It was really quite funny, but at the time we didn't know if it could be reversed."

A hand flew into the air, the freckled Hufflepuff again. "What's a Polyjuice Potion?"

"If I place one of your hairs, a fingernail or whatever into a Polyjuice Potion, I will turn into you for one hour. Really quite useful in certain circumstances, but against the rules unfortunately. Besides, such potions are advanced magic and dangerous at that."

"Can we make a love potion?" A Ravenclaw asked without raising her hand.

"Utterly illegal." Harry grinned, "However, you *can* open your notebooks."

* * *

When the second two-hour class rolled around Harry was nervous all over again. These were second years. He would actually have to make potions with them, which meant supervising and asking the students to try the mixtures themselves. He prayed no one would end up in the hospital wing. Snape would likely ring his neck if there were any mishaps.

Sara breezed into the room just as they were setting up their cauldrons and Harry brightened at the sight of her.

"Ah, Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs!" She said aloud, gathering everyone's attention, "What are you making today?"

"Cough syrup." Harry answered.

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"Cough syrup?" Sara's nose wrinkled, "How totally boring." Every face in the room smiled at her in agreement.

"It's on the lesson plan."

"How about this," She winked at the class, "We run right through cough syrup and go to, let's see, pepper-up potion?"

"Can't. Fourth year."

"How about a smoking potion? That's lots of fun."

"Second years walking around breathing smoke? Dumbledore would kill me."

"I could teach the girls how to make hair-curling potion. That's pretty safe." A chime of female voices

seemed to think this was a wonderful idea.

"What about the boys?"

"I don't know. What do boys like?"

"Girls."

Sara laughed. "You could make a muscle-growing serum."

"Does it look like I know that one?"

"Oh, uh, sorry."

Harry cracked a smile. "Boys like to gross people out."

"How about hair-alive? It's mostly the same stuff."

"Perfect."

Sara led the girls in brewing their hair-curling potion with a natural talent for leadership. She was completely at ease, the children seemed to adore her, and Harry envied her strong confidence. He was glad to have a bit of it himself as he clumsily instructed the boys and often handled the Confidall in his pocket, his nerves subsiding as comfort washed over him like a big hug.

By the end of two hours Sara had entirely missed History of Magic, every girl had pretty ringlets and the boys, well each end every strand of their hair stood on end and writhed like tiny snakes. Harry couldn't wait to see the reactions they got at lunch. Either the hair-alive would get a good laugh from the teachers - or he would be in trouble. Suddenly Harry wished they'd stuck to the lesson plans.

"Goodbye," Sara said, "It was so nice meeting you all. Now make sure you tell everyone that Harry was a wonderful teacher."

The children filed out in small groups, each thanking Harry and Sara for the best Potions class they'd ever had and many asked if Snape was coming back. Their faces soured when they learned that he would be.

After they'd gone Sara turned to smile at Harry. "You see Professor Potter? You've made it to lunch and you're still just fine."

"Yes, but your Confidall has been handled more times than Lavender and Patty put together."

Sara laughed out loud, "I forgot, your painted friends." She ran a finger over the clasp on his robe, "It was weird, seeing them all over you like that. I never gave a thought to the fact that other girls might be interested in you."

"Gee, thanks. Where's that Confidall? I suddenly think I need it."

"I just meant, well, it's only ever been us. Confined to my tower I was the only one for you."

"You still are. If you think I would let Lavender and Patty have their way with me you're crazy. They look so dirty next to you, Sara. You're so beautiful it's hard to think of anyone else."

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"And you're so sweet! But Harry, you're Quidditch Captain. You're a Prefect. Now you're a teacher of sorts, and you're famous! Harry, You're The Boy Who Lived. What girl wouldn't want to be with Harry Potter?"

"Obviously none! Only one girl has ever shown any interest in me besides you. And the Witches of Warpaint have never so much as given me a second glance until they found out I was teaching Potions. Obviously, famous does not mean popular." Harry said, "In fact, I often wonder why *you* like me. I'm not good looking. My clothes suck. Well, they did anyway. I do kick ass at Quidditch, excuse my vanity, but I don't like being famous. I largely ignore my Prefect duties. And Sara, you're astonishing, really. You could have anyone! Why me?"

"And who could I possibly love more? Malfoy? Get real, Harry." She looked him in the eye and smiled so affectionately that Harry was touched. "You understand me. You're patient and compassionate. You put others before yourself and you value friendship. People like Malfoy take friends for granted, see what they can get out of it for themselves. You're not like that. You're everything a girl wants in a guy! And you *are* good looking! I love to look at you. I love your emerald eyes, the way you look at me. I love the color of your hair. I even love your scar. You wouldn't be you without it. Harry, I love you. *Everything* about you. I could never feel this way about anyone else."

"Well now that that's out of the way, I'm starving."

Sara smiled and grabbed his arm as he tried to head for the door. "Just one question. Who was the other girl who showed interest in you?"

"It wasn't Hermione, if that's what you're thinking."

"Of course not. I see how she looks at you. With love and respect, but not the way she looks at Ron. It's completely different." She grinned, "Was this the girl you almost kissed?"

"Yes. But as I said, I didn't like her that way." Harry looked terribly uncomfortable, "Now give me your books, witch. I'll walk you to lunch."

* * *

"Harry I need to speak to you." Hermione said as she hurriedly piled sandwiches into a napkin, "It'll only take a minute." she poured herself some juice, "Hi Sara! How's Divination? Warm enough for you?"

"That woman must have ice water in her veins! I swear, I think I'm half cooked!"

Hermione laughed, "Tell her you see several students fainting from heat exhaustion. She might believe you. After all, Harry and Ron used to make up ridiculous predictions for their homework and she was thrilled with it. If she'll believe those two, she'll likely believe anything, especially a *real* Diviner."

"I'll keep that in mind. See you at dinner?"

"I hope so." She grabbed up the glass and the napkin, "Later Sara."

"Bye."

Harry walked Hermione to the corridor that led to the library, hoping they were out of earshot.

"What is it? What did you find?"

"It's a protective device."

"The crystal ball?"

"It's not just a crystal ball, Harry."

"What does it do? How does it work?"

"It will only respond to an Elemental, of course, but it will temporarily disarm anyone who's caught in the light it casts and no curses can be thrown at her while she's in the light."

"It takes the person's wand? She could just use expelliarmus."

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"No, silly. It mutes their magic, renders the person powerless and open to attack. Dark wizards have always gone after the Elemental, as far back as history can tell. The Orb was created with powerhungry Dark lords in mind, so there is also an anti-theft spell on it. Once Sara touches it, it will recognize her as an Elemental and no one but she will be able to move it after that. The only problem is, if you, or anyone else, is there you'll be rendered powerless as well."

"There's no way for her to tell it to leave me alone?"

"There is."

"Well? How is it done?"

"I don't know. That page has been ripped out."

"*Ripped out?* I don't suppose someone suddenly needed to blow their nose."

"I wonder what was on that page, Harry. It must be something important."

"Must be. At least we know how to use it, though. Voldemort can't get near her now."

"There's one problem with that theory."

"I'm sure you're about to point out my flaw?"

"Of course I am, that's my job in our little circle of friends, isn't it?" she smiled, "To keep you thinking? If she uses it he'll know without a doubt what she is and he'll come at her like never before. Even the Orb can't keep her from being outnumbered and physically overpowered. If a league of Deathaters were able to bind her hands, all she could do is make it rain and cause an Earthquake. We have to be careful."

"No lightning?"

"Not without her hands."

"Oh." Harry studied his feet, dismayed, "Well, what does Dumbledore say?"

"I'm going to report to him soon. There were a few more details I wanted to look up before I give him my findings."

"Good job, Hermione. Really. We knew absolutely nothing about it this morning."

"Thanks, Harry. I'll see you later."

* * *

Since Sara had another Divination class after lunch, she left early to air the place out before Treelawny arrived and Harry went back to the dungeons.

Class wasn't scheduled to start for another twenty minutes, so he wandered into Snape's office, sat in Snape's chair, and threw his feet up on the desk. He saw the picture at once and couldn't believe he'd missed it earlier. Dropping his feet to the floor in a fit of laughter, he lifted the frame. There they were in front of the Criterion, only Snape had drawn mustaches on Ron, Hermione, and Harry himself. Sara's image remained unmarred. He pulled out his wand to remove the extra artwork, then thought better of it. It was just too funny.

Harry undid the clasp on his robe and let it fall over the back of the chair, his spirits sank at the sight of Ron, mustache and all. His eyes lingered on the photo of his friend and Snape's words came back to him.

They could be mad by then, or irrevocably changed...

Harry wondered how Snape was making out. Surely he'd flown to London, or gone to Hogsmead and used floo powder or something, not taken the train. He'd been gone so long now that Harry worried he couldn't find what he needed.

"It's *you!*"

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Harry, having been badly startled, looked up to find his most favorite person in front of him with surprised, questioning eyes. "Me? Yeah, last time I checked."

"What the hell do you think you're doing, sitting in Snape's chair? Indeed! I'd hate to be you when he finds out you've been rifling through his office."

"Little slow on the news, aren't you, Malfoy? Snape's gone for the day. Dumbledore asked me to teach his class. Besides, I'd hardly call sitting in a chair '*rifling*'."

"Why would he ask you?" Draco sneered, "The Headmaster needs his head examined. I swear, if my father knew..."

"Malfoy?" Harry interrupted, meeting cool blue eyes, "You're father is an evil, deranged, lunatic. No offense."

To Harry's absolute shock, Draco smiled. "I know."

"Then why do you always..."

"Because, Potter. He scares people. I use what works, I'm a Slytherin aren't I?"

"To the core, I'm sorry to say."

"Maybe not so much anymore. Thanks to you and you're Wronski Feint, they think I'm a joke."

"Am I supposed to feel bad? You did run onto the field dressed as a Dementor, did you not?" Draco grinned. "I guess you wouldn't be swimming in guilt. I certainly wouldn't, but when I get my hands on those damned Weasleys I'm going to wring their identical little necks!"

"Saw the picture, did you?"

"Saw it? EVERYONE has a copy! I can't *stop* seeing it."

Harry laughed, unable to help it.

"Oh, shut-up, *Potter*." Malfoy folded his arms and scowled. "Nice sweater, by the way."

"Thanks. Yours isn't so bad, either, but then you probably knew that."

"What happened? You fall under the Knight Bus?"

Harry gingerly touched his bruised cheek. "Yup."

"Smug bastard. Anyway, I wanted to talk to you."

"Yeah, um, okay. This ought to be interesting." Harry sat up and waited.

"I want to talk to Sara and I want your permission."

"Why? She won't talk to you, no matter what I say."

"The memory charm wore off."

Harry considered this, what it could possibly mean. Malfoy, Harry realized, remembered being hit by lightning. "Go on. I'm listening."

"I didn't mean to scare her. I was despicable. I understand now why she was afraid of me at The Phantom."

"She was afraid of you because you tried to force her to kiss you! And when she tried to defend herself you pulled out your wand! Besides, she didn't like you before that. I think the word she used was 'vile'. It must be your overly pleasant disposition."

"I'm used to Slytherins, Potter. They *like* to be treated that way. I guess I don't know how to act around regular girls, like Sara. When I met her I just barged in and expected her to instantly adore me, most girls can't help themselves you know, but when she didn't I insisted. Then again she's your girlfriend. I should have transfigured into a puppy."

"You're in love with her!"

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"I don't know."

"Why are you telling me this? She's my girlfriend! *I* love her." Harry realized he was trembling and fished the Confidall out of his pocket. "I'll talk to her, but if she agrees I want to be there."

"Fine." Malfoy said, "Just don't punch me. By the look of your face, anger has become a bit of a problem for you."

"This?" Harry indicated his black eye, "This was just for fun."

"Harry, there's something I need to ask you."

"What happened to 'Potter'?"

"This is different. You're in danger and so is Sara."

"Is this the part where I fall at your feet and thank you? Sara has been in danger for a long time. Why do you think no one knew she was here? Hence the memory charm. And me? Danger's my *middle* name. Then again you've probably never seen that movie."

"Movie? What...Oh never mind." Draco took a deep breath, "Just give me some of your blood."

"Throw in an arm, two teeth and a Mountain Dew and it's a deal." Harry grinned.

Draco grew frustrated. "Aren't you the least bit concerned about Sara's safety? Are you really going to let her come to harm?"

"I would protect her with my life, you moron."

"Potter, you would protect a monkey with your life. It's beside the point. What do you think would happen if you weren't *around* to protect her? I need that blood. I'm *asking* you."

"Draco, you just said that your house considers you a laughingstock because of me. On top of that, when I broke your nose you vehemently vowed revenge. You've always hated me and now I'm supposed to trust that you mean well? Take your word on blind faith? I wasn't born last night. Get lost."

Malfoy ignored him. "True, I despise you, but anything I ever did to you was all in fun. I don't want you dead. Did you just call me Draco?"

"I don't think you want me dead, but I don't think you would mind if someone came along and offed me, either. Now you're practically begging to help me and you haven't told me what you know."

"I can't. Please, you'll just have to trust me."

"Now it's *please*?"

"Malfoys *never* say please. And I may be a lot of things, Potter, but I'm not a liar. You must understand I'm telling you the truth."

"Why wouldn't you just save her yourself? She would consider you a hero. It doesn't add up."

"I'm not hero material. That's your department."

"Heroism is defined by one's actions, Malfoy. Anyone can be one."

"*Actions*? Do you remember the detention we served together first year? When we went into the forest? We stood side by side as Voldemort rose from the dead unicorn. You stood your ground. I ran."

"You were eleven."

"Harry, you're the only one who can stand up to him."

Harry looked Malfoy in the eye and saw none of his usual malice, only sincerity and impatience. And fear. There was a little of that, too.

Harry sighed and pulled up his sleeve. "Alright. Get something to put it in."

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* * *

"I can't believe our rotten luck." Hermione said as she slammed her bag on the table. Harry sat alone in the common room, playing a solitaire game of exploding snap and the cards went flying in all directions.

"Thanks, Hermione." Harry looked around at the mess her bag had caused. "*Accio*." The cards flew into his hand. "Rotten luck? I feel better already."

"I sent an urgent owl to Flourish and Blotts. *Diviners and their Devices* was published by a long defunct independent house in 1723. Only two copies are still in existence. The owners of which are the Ministry of Magic, who acquired their copy from the estate of Tom Riddle Sr."

"And the other? Don't be so damn dramatic, Hermione. Just say it. *Is owned by...*"

"Lucius Malfoy."

Harry's face turned white.

"Dumbledore himself contacted the Ministry to inquire about the page, only their copy seems to have gone missing."

"Which one do we have?" Harry wondered, thinking himself an idiot for trusting Draco Malfoy.

"There's no way to know." She hesitated, "Harry? What's wrong. You look positively ill."

"Does it feel like we're being set up? Or am I paranoid?"

"I don't know." She answered honestly, "Everything's so coincidental. You finding the Orb of Arassel after four hundred years of obscurity, me happening upon this incredibly helpful, yet extremely rare book. And the books themselves, they both have ties to Voldemort. It seems unlikely he wouldn't know about the Orb. You're right. It's almost as if he meant for us to have these things. What doesn't make sense is why someone vicious enough to attack four students in their beds would be trying to find it. It blows the idea of a set-up to pieces."

"Not unless it ties in with what's on that missing page. What does Dumbledore say?"

"He has no idea what's going on, but Snape came in while I was there. He was furious over the fact that you taught his class." Hermione paused to see him grin, "He was shouting so loud that, even though I was out in the corridor, I managed to overhear that wolf's bane and wormwood, among other things, were missing from his lab. Harry, whoever made that potion, they did it here."

"Morgio."

"I thought the same thing, but why would he? We can't automatically blame the DADA teacher, as likely as it may seem. He would know he'd be the most obvious suspect. He could be someone's scapegoat as well."

"He sleeps in the dungeon and has befriended Snape. He works for the Ministry and has access to their library. It *must* be him!"

"There's someone else it could be." Hermione continued, "Draco Malfoy. His father owns one of the books. They could have been hiding the Orb all this time as well. His is one of the oldest wizarding families around, they have loads of money and an enormous mansion to go with it. It's entirely possible."

"I can't believe it's Draco. This is beyond even him. Besides, he would never be so clumsy with a potion. It just can't be." Harry thought for a moment, "Maybe they found out I had the Orb only after I bought it?"

"Then last night would make perfect sense. But the book? I found it two weeks ago...oh yeah. A couple of days *after* you bought the Orb."

"I think we should be looking at Morgio."

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"Harry. Almost every time we've jumped to conclusions we've been wrong. I'm not saying we are, but we need to keep an open mind."

"Agreed." Harry sighed.

"Have you been to the hospital wing?" she wondered, her tone gentle, hushed.

"Yes. There's no change." Harry grew depressed, "I tried to cast a spell on Ron -"

"WHAT?!"

"-for peaceful sleep. Madam Pomfrey screamed at me and threw me out. I only wanted to help, but she's right. It was stupid of me. I don't know what I was thinking."

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Harry." she reached across the table and grasped his hand, "He'll be ok." he met her eyes and saw she almost believed it. "Come on, let's go down to the Potions lab and see if we can lend a hand."

"Alright, but there's something I need to do. The sooner the better. Actually, you go ahead without me."

* * *

Harry stood outside the portrait hole in his invisibility cloak, nervously waiting as voices passed in the distance. No one came near. Finally, gathering his courage and squeezing the Confidall, he spoke an almost forgotten password and slipped into the opening behind the statue.

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10. Surprise Party - The Orb of Arassel, Part II

"Harry, you have to help me decorate!" Hermione insisted, "I can't believe this! Sara's party is tonight! Can't whatever it is wait?"

"How hard can it be? A few waves of your wand and presto!" Harry argued, "Besides, we should

decorate later. What if Sara goes back to the tower?"

"Later? Are you kidding? You remember Ron? Your friend?"

Harry bit his lip. It wasn't often Hermione annoyed him, but this last comment nearly pushed him over the edge. "I'll be there when the potion is ready."

"I hope so, Harry," she resigned, "I just want everything to be perfect for Sara. After all, she's had it kind of hard for awhile."

"You're telling me? Really!" Harry looked away, growing angry. It wasn't his nature, in fact he couldn't remember ever being truly angry at Hermione, so he blamed it on stress. He had a lot on his mind, after all. It wasn't every day he handed over his life's blood to the likes of Draco Malfoy.

"Hermione, *I'll help you*. As long as it's later. There are a few things I have to take care of first, okay? Stop being impossible. Just...go...study, or something."

He felt her irritation radiate over him in waves as she glared, lips pressed together until they were white, arms folded. He half smiled and she spun around, leaving him standing there as she stalked off.

Instantly he felt bad. She'd been through so much the last two days, long hours of endless studying and worrying constantly about Ron. Harry suddenly felt like a huge, insensitive creep. "Hermione!"

He yelled, but she had turned the corner and was gone. Harry sighed and hurried to the owlry.

Hedwig would be upset if she knew he was using a school owl, but everyone at Hogwarts, including the Slytherins, knew Hedwig belonged to him. He needed this to be a secret, for Malfoy's sake as well as his own. If his team knew he was sending notes to Draco they would demand an explanation. What would he say?

He read the note one last time before giving it to the barn owl who awaited it.

Sara will see you. Meet us in the empty room, 2nd floor corridor, five doors down on the right past the suit of armor. Ten minutes. This better be good.

He hadn't signed his name, just in case.

* * *

"Where is she?"

"She'll be along shortly," Harry answered, "I wanted to talk to you first."

"I knew I should have been late," Malfoy sighed and dropped into one of four dusty chairs. "Well? What is it?"

"How much do you know?"

"As I said, I can't tell you."

"Even here? In this room?"

"You never know who might be listening, Potter. Either of us could have been followed. A spider on the wall could be a transfigured Death eater, you know that. Better safe than sorry."

"I wouldn't have had you pegged as Cliche' Man."

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"Shut-up, Potter. *I can't tell you anything*. Get it through that thick head of yours. It's not that I don't want to. I'd much rather spill everything I know and let *Hero Boy* save the day. Unfortunately for me, I can't do that."

"Does your need of my blood have anything to do with a page missing from one of your father's books?"

"It might."

"That's what I was afraid of," Harry said and crossed the dusty room, stopping directly in front of the blonde boy in the chair. "Why are you trying to get Sara, and me for that matter, to trust you? This is not a game, Malfoy. People's lives are at stake."

"Which is what I was trying to tell you."

Harry looked Draco in the eye. "Do you mean us harm?"

Malfoy stood, maintaining eye contact, and Harry didn't budge. They stood nose to nose, ice-blue eyes to emerald green, barely an inch between them. Draco reached into the pocket of his robe and pulled out a small vial. He held it in front of Harry's face. "Your blood, Potter. I asked you to trust me. If you don't, then take it."

Harry took it and stepped back, but he didn't put it in his pocket, merely held it, considering it. "I went to Hogsmead last night, to buy a Sneak-o-scope. Someone had smashed the one Ron gave me."

"You wanted to see if I was an enemy? Was that your plan?"

"Yes."

"Then get it out, Potter. To tell the truth, I'm curious. I still despise you, but as I said, I have no malicious intent."

"I can't. Someone had bought them all. There's none to be had for miles."

The surprise and utter bewilderment Harry saw on Malfoy's face was reassuring to say the least. He'd been sure that Malfoy - and all his money - had played some part. Being wrong had never pleased him so much as it did now.

"What, is Dumbledore giving them out for Christmas?"

"Doubtful," Harry said, holding tightly to the vial of blood in his hand. "I think someone wants me not to know who to trust, or to trust someone I shouldn't. I'm nervous, Draco. I find myself wanting to trust you. I don't know what to do."

"You don't have to do anything. Give me what's in your hand and I'll make sure of that," Draco said and held out his palm. In a whisper, eyes jumping around the room, he told Harry; "And keep your wand at the ready tonight."

Harry's face was grave. Sara's party was tonight. He gave Draco the vial.

A light rap on the door drew their attention and it opened, Sara stepping through, glancing out into the corridor before closing it behind her. She was straight-faced and none the less happy when she regarded Draco, but her expression soon changed.

"You look different." She said and approached him, ignoring Harry, who took a cowering seat.

"You've changed."

"If that's what you want to call it." Draco sighed. "Sara, I want to apologize for being so forward with you. I was rather harsh, rude really, and presumptuous. It's unforgivable, I know, but I never meant to scare you at the club."

"It's alright, Malfoy. You got what you deserved." She glanced at Harry and gave him a warm smile.

"I'll accept your apology, but on my terms."

Draco looked relieved for a moment, then realized this could be bad and felt his face turn grim.

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"Sit down. Let me read your palm."

"Is that all?" Draco laughed, "You had me worried there." He fell back into his earlier seat and Sara pulled over a chair, charmed the dirt away, and sat opposite him. She took his hand. Her expression turned from mildly pleasant to shocked and horrified instantly, before she'd even looked at it.

"Harry," she said without turning, "leave us. I want to talk to him."

"No."

"Just stand outside the door. It's okay."

"Sara, I won't leave you alone with him."

"You *will*, Harry. Because I asked you to. I'll scream if he tries to kiss me." She half-smiled and Malfoy actually looked embarrassed. "Please trust me."

"Always." Harry said and stood, "I swear, Malfoy, if you do anything at all they'll need a mop to get you off the floor."

Draco opened his mouth to voice some sarcastic retort, but Sara warned him with a glance and he closed it again. Harry went to the door and hesitantly, walked through it.

* * *

"It's about time you two got here!" Hermione said, looking angry, "Snape is measuring out the doses right now! You nearly missed it." She turned her gaze intently on Harry, "Imagine how Ron would feel if you weren't here when he opened his eyes."

Sara put an arm around Hermione's shoulders. "It's my fault, really. Don't be too hard on Harry."

"Hermione, I'm sorry about earlier." Harry said, hanging his head a little, "This has been hard for me, but I'll bet it's been a lot harder on you. I wasn't thinking. I was being very selfish and I'm sorry." Hermione's face melted. "It's okay, Harry. Don't worry about it. I wasn't exactly being fair with you, either."

Harry smiled just as a bustle of noise entered from behind. Harry and Sara turned to see Snape and Madam Pomfrey coming toward the beds with a tray holding four cups. Hermione stood and moved out of the way.

Sara and Snape each took one of the cups and moved to Dean and Seamus in the farthest beds, Madam Pomfrey took one, and gave the last to Hermione, who smiled with gratitude. "You wake him, dear."

Madam Pomfrey told her, "I'll bet he'd rather see your face peering down at him than mine."

Dumbledore had appeared, though no one could say *when* exactly, and he watched as Harry lifted Ron's head off the pillow and Hermione poured the drink into his mouth.

"He's waking up!" Sara said of Seamus.

"So is Mr. Longbottom." Pomfrey announced. "How is Mr. Thomas, Severus?"

"Coming to life, it appears."

"Ron! Can you hear me?" Hermione asked as Ron's ginger eyelashes began to flutter. "Do you feel alright?"

"Well for God's sake, girl, give him a moment! It's a potion, not a smelling salt!"

"Don't yell at her, Severus!" Sara admonished, "She's been worried sick!"

Madam Pomfrey shook her head, "Keep your voices low! These boys are waking from nightmares! You'll frighten them!"

"Quite correct." Dumbledore agreed as he moved into the midst of the infirmary beds, "Everyone, let's just stand back and wait."

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Silence ensued, though no one stood back. Harry and Hermione watched over Ron, her sitting on the bed beside him and Harry standing over the pillow. Madam Pomfrey hovered over Neville and Sara sat beside Seamus, whom she had never properly met, holding his hand, thinking he would be disoriented when he woke and in need of comfort. Dean Thomas, unfortunately for him, would be greeted by the sight of Severus Snape looming over him and Harry wondered if Dean would wake thinking he was still having terrible dreams. He almost laughed, but Ron opened his eyes.

A rat, with one odd paw, skittered across the room and hid under an unoccupied bed, unseen.

* * *

"I can't get to it." Morgio paced the room, "That fool made such a mess of things that Dumbledore took the Orb of Arassel and has it locked in his office."

"So what do we do? I got Potter to trust me and for what?" Draco demanded, "So I could do absolutely nothing with his blood?"

"It's going to have to fall on your shoulders, Draco."

"What do you mean? I couldn't possibly get into the Headmaster's office any better than you can!"

Start speaking sense to me."

Morgio sat down in the large chair behind his desk, picking up a quill. "Here," he said as he wrote, "are the words you will need." He handed the small slip to Draco, who pocketed it, "Get to that Orb, Draco. Get to it, even if it's at the last possible moment."

"Sounds like hero stuff, Morgio. Perhaps we should trust this to someone more qualified. While I'd hardly consider him a hero, Snape will be there. Why don't I just give the honor of this task to him?"

"Spoken like a true coward."

Draco's steel-blue eyes narrowed. "Watch what you say, teacher. Malfoy's don't take well to insults."

"Then perhaps Malfoy's shouldn't set themselves up for them. But to answer your question, Severus cares far too much for the girl, Sara. She's like a daughter to him. If he knew what was to happen there would be no celebration. My betrayal would be obvious."

"I see." Draco said and stood, "I'll do my best, but what if Potter gets himself killed?"

"Some things can't be avoided."

Draco considered this. "I was wrong, Morgio. My father wouldn't *like* you, he would *love* you."

"Somehow I doubt that. I doubt that very much."

"I'll do my best." Draco checked a very expensive watch, "The party starts in one hour. And Weasley should be revived by now. That's a huge set-back. Harry trusts me, but Weasley would never." he thought a moment, "May I borrow an owl?"

* * *

"I do say, Harry, this pepper-up potion is bloody wonderful stuff! I feel great!" Ron said as vines of moonlight roses flew from the tip of his wand, "Who knew Snape would be so generous? I hurt all over until he gave it to me."

"He didn't want Sara to worry tonight, Ron." Hermione answered as she produced thousands of stars to hover over Sara's rooftop like Christmas lights, "It's her birthday after all."

Harry was busy conjuring dozens of balloons in shades of purple and silver and fastening them every few feet along the wall. "I wonder if I should give her the Orb. It could put her in even more danger, like you said, Hermione."

"You can't keep it from her." She said as she spread lavender tablecloths, silver and gold confetti, and sugared violets across the many tables brought over from the storage room across the hall. "Harry, you have no right. You never know, she may need it someday."

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"Right Harry," Ron added, "Besides, it's up to her to use it. She may never decide to, but you'd never forgive yourself if anything happened. Something that could have been prevented."

"But what if it gets her killed? Or worse?" Harry stopped floating luminous bubbles into the air,

"What if giving it to her is the worst thing I could do?"

Hermione ceased lighting candles and took Harry's hand. "You heard Dumbledore. *It's already hers.*

Harry, he's her Uncle. And he knows what's best. He wants her to have it."

"Okay." He smiled, the weight of the decision lifted from his shoulders, "If Dumbledore wants her to have it, then so do I."

Hermione smiled and went back to the decorations. Ron continued wrapping the rose vines around anything he could find, and Harry's eye trained on an owl, carrying a letter. The blackish bird didn't drop the envelope in the smooth graceful way owls dropped things, so that they landed right in your hands, it practically threw it at him, but still had good aim. Glancing around, he saw that his friends were too busy to have noticed the delivery, so he tucked it into an inside pocket and went into Sara's rooms.

He returned a moment later and announced he would be back in a few minutes. Ron was indifferent, but Hermione gave him an annoyed and suspicious glance.

Madam Hooch had brought a good supply of the school's brooms for the party guests to navigate the hundreds of steps of the tower, but Harry had remembered to bring his Firebolt and climbed onto it, flying swiftly. He left it at the bottom and hurried to Dumbledore's office.

* * *

"I need the Orb, Professor. I have to re-wrap it before the party."

"I was hoping that could wait until I brought it to Sara's tower myself, Harry." Dumbledore regarded him curiously, "I'm not sure it's safe for you to go walking around with it."

"I'll be fine, sir." Harry assured him, "After all, I know someone is looking for it. I'll be careful."

"I'm sure you will. However, the Orb is not safe until Sara has it in her possession. Until then, any clever thief could get his hands on it. Bring the wrapping here."

"Please, Sir. Time is running short. Snape will be bringing Sara back to the tower in only twenty minutes and I still haven't dressed. I won't let anything happen to it."

"Harry?" Dumbledore asked with raised eyebrows, "Is there something you should tell me?"

He hesitated, knowing Dumbledore had sensed his apprehension, then decided even he wouldn't understand. Handing his blood over to Malfoy was hardly justifiable. In fact, it could be considered reckless. Draco's warning flashed in his mind as well, but Harry pushed it back. He would not spoil Sara's party. "No, sir."

The old wizard smiled with amusement. "The answer to that question is *always* no. Take the Orb, Harry. Sara will be disappointed if you're late."

"Thank you, Professor."

As Dumbledore unlocked the well-warded cabinet which held Sara's birthday gift, Harry realized how much the man could say with so little words. What he'd really said was *I know something's going on,*

but I've trusted you before and I'm trusting you again. Harry only hoped what lay behind his thanks got through to his mentor as well.

Dumbledore handed Harry the box. "When I wrote you a few weeks ago I mentioned a new development regarding Voldemort."

"I remember," Harry said, having been insanely curious about the topic ever since.

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"After running several tests on the cloak he left behind at the Leaky Cauldron, it has been determined that our enemy is gathering magical particles to himself, called Magitites. These particles are found in all things on Earth, but they are few, unless you stumble across a rich vein."

"What is he doing with them?"

"Using them to create a form for himself, something substantial that will allow him full use of his powers. Magitite can be permanently transfigured into anything and is practically invincible as human flesh. At the moment, he's literally full of the most powerful magical substance on the planet and he gets stronger every day."

"So we kill him before he can become whole."

"It's not that easy, Harry. It's a lot harder to scatter Magitite than it is to draw it, though that's no easy feat, either. Disbursing it requires several wizards and a rather difficult spell. We would have to overpower him to do it."

* * *

Draco was pacing the room and muttering to himself when Harry hurried through the door of the place they'd last met. There was a dusty and well-worn table pushed into one corner of the room and Draco directed Harry to place the Orb on it. As Harry took it out of its box, Draco looked him over, then shook his head.

"You aren't going to your girlfriend's party in *that*, are you?"

"Of course not!" Harry exclaimed, "Now we don't have much time, I need to change obviously, so do what you have to do."

"Wait in the hall, Potter."

"There's no way in *hell* I'm leaving this room."

"You have to. I only require one minute, then you can get out of those clothes."

Harry looked stunned, then smiled. "You're a big cutie, Malfoy, but I'm not that kind of guy."

It was Draco's turn to look stunned, then realizing what he'd said, he burst out laughing. "Potter," he bellowed, "You remove so much as *a sock* in front of me and I'll kill you!"

Harry's face turned suddenly serious. "I just hope that's not what you're doing." He tilted his chin toward the Orb. "You've got one minute." He turned and went out, shutting the door behind him. Malfoy stared at the door, his laughter caught dead in his throat, his smile gone. "Me, too." He said.

"Getting sentimental are we?" whispered a voice from the corner.

"Shut-up, just get it done."

Scabbers became Wormtail and emerged from the shadows, crossing the room to where the Orb sat on the table. He withdrew a small vial from his pocket, and poured its contents over the surface of the crystal ball. He then produced a folded page, printed and showing all the signs of having been torn from a book. He recited four brief lines from one side.

Draco expected the Earth to tremble or something, but all that happened was a minute flash from within the Orb, letting them know the spell indeed worked. Wormtail looked pleased with himself.

"Now hurry, tell Morgio it's done. Run!"

Wormtail transfigured back into Scabbers and scampered quickly through a small hole in the darkest corner of the room.

Draco produced a second vial and considered it seriously before fumbling out the stopper with shaky hands.

* * *

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"Harry! Where have you been?" Hermione demanded.

"Talk about last minute!" Ron agreed, looking dubious, "We went back to change and you weren't there."

"I ran into Malfoy harassing some first-year Ravenclaws." He lied.

"Damn that Malfoy." Hermione said, her brow furrowed with annoyance, "I *can't wait* until we're rid of him."

"We'll never be rid of him." Harry and Ron said in unison. All three of them laughed and Harry's friends forgot they were mad at him. Hermione took the re-wrapped Orb to the over-laden gift table on the roof and Ron wandered out with Harry.

The decorations were breathtaking, even more so than he'd imagined and the roof was full of people. All the teachers were there, save a few, and they'd invited most of the sixth and seventh year Gryffindors, as well as the prefects from Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. Sara didn't know anyone, so Hermione thought it would be a nice way for her to make some friends.

In the center of the roof there was a large fountain depicting three beautifully carved mermaids shooting streams of sparkling champagne from the conch shells they held to their mouths like trumpets. Wizards and witches in fine evening clothes, many of them wearing dress capes made from fine fabrics, stood around it, sipping from crystal glasses trimmed in gold. Ron's moonlight roses glowed gossamer all around them on vines that encircled everything and covered much of the walls like ivy. Candles flickered on every table and Hermione's stars sparkled above like thousands of tiny

diamonds stuck in the fabric of the night sky. Harry's luminous bubbles floated aimlessly, bumping around the heads of all the mingling people on the roof. The scene was beautiful. It was, well, *magical*.

"You look great, Harry." Ron said, "You look funny in a cape, though. And you've got it tied wrong. It's a *dress* cape. Only women tie them like that. You have to put it over one shoulder like this," Ron untied Harry's cape before he could stop him and was rearranging it, "Then bring it under the other arm and tie it across your chest." he stepped back. "That's better."

"*Since when* do you know so much about capes, Ron?"

Ron tipped his head toward a small group of Gryffindors, "Hermione. I tied mine like a girl, too." He grinned and Harry laughed.

"She looks breathtaking, Ron." Harry spoke of Hermione, looking in her direction, "I think these girls are only here on Earth to make us dizzy. Sara sometimes looks so good she makes my head spin."

"Don't I know it!" Ron laughed, "It's for that reason alone Hermione always gets her way. I think I'd agree to dance naked in the fountain if she smiled and asked me to right now."

Silently, they regarded Hermione, talking and smiling across the roof, her hair swept up in a lovely gathering of elaborate tufts and curls, sprinkled with glitter and jewels twinkling in the soft light. She wore a long sapphire-blue silk dress with spaghetti straps and a crushed velvet silver cape tied around her shoulders.

Snape came through the doors, purposely misted over and equipped with a noise-blocking charm, and quickly shut them. "She's here!" He yelled, "Get ready!"

The area before the doors immediately cleared, Snape stepping off to the side, and Hermione hurried to the front to stand with Harry and Ron. Dumbledore also appeared near-by and all commotion stopped.

Sara stepped onto the roof and stopped dead when she saw the many people crowded together there. Her eyes flicked over their smiling faces, then around at the decorations. Her hands flew to her face and she pressed them over her mouth, hanging open in shock.

"*SURPRISE!!!*"

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She burst into tears even as her face lit up and her smile could be seen, lifting her features from behind her hands.

Applause rang out, along with an echoing chorus of *Happy Birthday, Sara*. She looked at Harry, Ron, and Hermione, tears in her eyes and her face wet with them. She gave them her warmest smile and whispered *Thank you*.

* * *

Dressed to the nines in black and silver, Draco threw back one side of his green silk cloak, lined with gossamer satin, and admired his Lightning Mach 1 before propping it against the wall of the Astronomy Tower. He could see the lights of the party, hear faint music and the murmur of voices form the adjacent tower, but he couldn't really make out anyone. His voyeuristic instincts and natural curiosity wanted to get closer, but he knew it was safest to keep a good distance. It would be less likely he would be seen or recognized. Plus if someone happened upon him it wouldn't seem odd that a student was in the Astronomy Tower, looking out at the night sky. It also helped that he was above them, watching as they danced under a cloud of fireflies.

What he really wanted was to join the party. He wondered what it was like to be among them, at a joyous gathering of do-gooders, sipping champagne and dancing with the prettiest girls. He'd been to more parties that he could count and his family held several every year, but they didn't have the quaint, whimsical feel or the warm glow and mirth of the one he was silently attending right now. It was nice, he thought, like peering in through the frosty window of home and seeing a toasty, glowing fire, your favorite couch and a steamy mug of Christmas punch after a long journey in the cold. Your toes numb with it.

The parties of Malfoy Manor were less like the window and more like the cold winter's journey. Death eaters galore had milled around the vast atrium amid statues of unimaginable beasts, the centerpiece of which was a working guillotine. The younger ones danced, but the preferred music had a harder, almost gothic edge. There were slow dances here and there, but not many. The music was eerie and not in the least romantic, having been chosen by his father, who bought it at *Muggle Mania*. The wizards there magically transferred the recordings into 1 inch glass squares for the Mega-Muggle Music Player that sat in the corner. The music was what Draco liked *most* about the parties. There had never been champagne. Hard liquor and red wine usually. Lots of mind-altering potions, too, which were tried by many, but not Draco. He thought the wizards that drank them acted strange, saying inappropriate or ludicrous things and didn't want to make himself look foolish. To him, that was his biggest phobia. Besides, he often drank enough merlot to consider slipping off with many of the Slytherin girls he would never think about dating, who would always accompany their parents to what Draco had recently started calling *The Gatherings of the Hell-bound Freaks*, much to his father's dismay.

And the conversation? Smiles were found mostly on the faces of Dark wizards talking about a devious plot, corruption, hexes, curses, and/or torture tactics. Dinner would include some bizarre looking beast still in possession of its cooked head. He always ate the meat, however, even though he found it revolting, because he'd been told that he must. The ghouls that served them at these events had given him nightmares as a child.

Draco smiled as he mounted his new broom, determined to find a closer vantage point.

* * *

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Sara was beaming as she opened her gifts. A silver hand mirror from Hermione that recited Shakespearian sonnets as she looked into it. A pretty diamond chip and amethyst encrusted hair comb from Ron which looked to have cost more than he could afford. She'd handed the comb to Ron and bent her head as if to receive a tiara. He'd tucked it into her hair carefully and smiled when she hugged him and kissed his cheek. Harry could tell Sara had especially liked this gift, her face had lit up as it had for no other. Not even the elaborate set of potions Snape had made for her, though Harry knew she'd liked that a great deal as well. He had also noticed the horror on the faces of the other students when Sara had hugged Snape and called him Severus, in fact he'd almost laughed out loud and could hear Ron and Hermione giggling by his side. As an honorary Gryffindor, Sara's affection for Snape could be considered a traitorous act.

Harry smiled as she opened gift after gift, thinking she looked incredibly beautiful. A few moments after she'd arrived, Sara had grabbed Hermione's arm and dragged her off to her dressing room. When they'd re-emerged, Sara was wearing a slim black dress similar to Hermione's, delicate black sandals and a midnight-purple satin cape, lined with a lighter shade of the same color. Her hair was done up, too, swept into a pile of curls entwined with tiny braids, and like Hermione's, adorned with jewels and dusted with sparkling glitter. Her face was alive and arresting as always, and there was a warmth in her smile, a lilt in her melodic laugh that raised the spirits of everyone near her. Dancing with Sara under the twinkling blanket of stars, gazing down at her as the roof swirled around them, was a moment engraved in his memory for all time.

Sara was down to two gifts. Harry's and a small, square box. The little card attached to the top of the smaller gift read;

Open in private without delay.

DM

"Harry? Is this your gift?" She indicated the larger one, and when everyone looked to Harry, Sara tucked the gift from Malfoy into the unused wand pocket of her cape.

"Uh...yes."

"Then let's prolong it a few minutes. I need to go check on something."

The party guests fell into discussion with one another before she'd even left her seat and she was glad not to have eyes on her as she made her way to Harry and whispered in his ear. Come with me.

"What do you think it is?" She asked as they looked down at the gift behind the closed door of Sara's bathroom, "Do you think I should open it?"

"Let me." Harry said and drew his wand. "Get behind me."

With a flick of his wrist the paper fell away and the velvet box opened. It was an unusual pendant on a gold chain, intricately crafted gold filigree surrounding a smooth, flat diamond circle, like a glass coin, with two thick crimson lines inside it, swirled together like a peppermint candy.

"It's exquisite!" Sara said from around Harry's shoulder, "Harry, it's beautiful!"

"There's a note." Harry said, plucking a small folded paper from the inside lid of the box. He opened it and they both read it.

Sara,

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This is a Fortificus Charm. The chambers in the center hold a drop of blood from each of two powerful wizards. Harry, and me, of course. Wear it and you'll receive protection, as well as strength. You never know when you'll need it.

Happy Birthday,

Draco

After no more than a moment's thought, Harry took the charm from the box himself and put it around Sara's neck. As she turned to admire it in the mirror, there came a soft knock at the door.

"Harry? Sara?"

It was Dumbledore. Harry opened the door.

"Interesting choice of rooms, I must say."

"It was closest." Sara answered.

"My dear, what is that around your neck? I assume this is what you hid in your pocket a moment ago." Dumbledore lifted the half-dollar sized pendant on his fingers and bent in for a closer look. "I do say! Where did this come from?"

Harry was still trying to think of what to say when Sara announced "Draco Malfoy."

"For once Mr. Malfoy surprises me! This is a Fortificus Charm, a most generous gift! They're very powerful and their price reflects their rarity. The wizard who made these died many, many years ago. Not long after I was born if I remember correctly. Unfortunately, he left no instructions behind. No one else knows how it was done."

Sara touched the charm and looked at Harry. She was expecting him to be upset by the fact that Malfoy had given her an expensive gift and she was wearing it, but he smiled back at her and she thought he looked a little...relieved?

Dumbledore continued, "Voldemort himself could put his blood in there and it would only serve you well. Don't worry about any adverse affects from it. Now come, everyone is anxious to see Harry's gift. Just a word though, Sara. We had to put a transfiguration spell on it so no one will know what it truly is. It looks like what it is, of course, but not *which one*, if you follow me. We'll explain as soon as we can, but make certain you touch it as soon as possible."

"Why am I getting nervous?"

"Don't be." Harry smiled, "Come on, let's go back to the party. Oh, and Sara? Go light on the champagne tonight, okay?"

* * *

Someone had made flower crowns for Harry and Sara from moonlight roses and violets and Draco saw quite a few others were wearing them now, too. Potter looked like an idiot wearing flowers on his head, but Sara looked like a fairy princess. She had taken off her cape as many had, and the satin sheen of her bare shoulders was visible even from his spot on a nearby balcony. She was stunning in black, he thought, with her blonde hair and blue eyes set against the dark of her dress. She was far more beautiful than any of the models in *Wizard Weekly*. She was so elegant, almost regal in manner. She was like no one he'd ever met.

He really didn't care if someone found him. They'd accuse him of something, of that he was sure, but they already knew he had a thing for Sara. He would just say he didn't dare try to attend the party, which was embarrassing, but the truth.

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Sara was wearing the necklace, he could see, and The Orb of Arassel sat on the table with the other gifts. He remembered her face when she'd opened it, the pale pinkish glow when she'd reached into the box and brought it out and schmuck-boy had blushed scarlet when Sara hugged him and kissed him on the lips. This struck up a great deal of lively applause and cheers from the large group of onlookers.

Sickening. Draco thought, but then again he'd give anything to be in Harry Potter's shoes right now. Hell, he'd even wear the stupid flowers on his head! Jealousy invaded him and he found it depressing. With a sigh he watched them dance to "Angel" by the muggle Sarah Mc Lachlan, who's music had found its way into the new Muggle Music Players (which mostly came full of the Beatles, The Rolling Stones, and Elton John.) Draco considered it "women's music", but hearing it now made him think of Sara Lemke, even though her head rested on the shoulder of Harry Potter, one beautiful hand holding a forgotten champagne glass, her arm wrapped around his back, the other holding his as they danced in slow, lazy circles.

When the song ended Draco was shocked to see Snape cut in. Potter hesitated, kissed Sara's cheek, then stalked off without a word. What was even more amazing was that Snape was an excellent dancer. He saw Seamus Finnegan and that Dean kid still pigging out at the food table. Neville Longbottom was dancing clumsily with Professor Sprout. Granger and Weasley were dancing, but they barely moved, obviously lost in their own little world. Dumbledore and McGonagall danced like old people should, very carefully, and Draco swore he could hear their bones creaking. That phony predictor of doom, Treelawny, watched alone from the wall and she'd been making too many trips to the champagne fountain. *Pathetic.*

Harry was mingling, Draco noticed, as he waited for Snape's dance with Sara to end, moving among groups of Hufflepuffs, Ravenclaws, and Gryffindors. No Slytherins, though. They hadn't been invited. Malfoy's chest tightened and for the first time in all his years as a student, he was ashamed to be one of them. He never saw it before, but it came clear in this moment that it was Slytherins who were the outcasts. The ones who didn't fit with the rest of the school.

Somewhere in his daydreaming, most of the guests had left the party and more were leaving now. It was almost 2:30am, after all and Draco's eyes were growing heavy. There were now only about ten people left on the roof. He could see Harry and Sara, Granger, Weasley, McGonagall, Dumbledore, Snape, Seamus, Dean, and Neville. They were gathered around the gift table, talking, laughing, and occasionally picking up a different gadget to test out. It happened all -

* * *

- of a sudden. More than twenty Death eaters dropped onto the roof. Neville screamed, and Hermione and Sara took in a sharp, audible breath. "Augh! Not *them!*" Ron yelled as a full-size Sneak-o-scope went crazy on the table. Harry heard the doors behind them slam shut and the small clicks of the locks falling into place. Their only escape that didn't involve a very long fall. As the Death eaters closed in, creating a circle around the gift table, the wizards in party dress fanned out to protect the rear, wands held out before them. All except Dumbledore, who rarely used one and Sara, who didn't even own one and never had. They took a more casual stance which Harry envied. They appeared to regard the advancing threat with perfect nonchalance.

Suddenly, Hermione bellowed "*Expelliarmus!*"

"*Rictusempra!*" Sara yelled. Suddenly curses were being thrown from everywhere, four Death eaters flew clean off the roof, Seamus' target burst into flames, and Dumbledore stunned three with a single gesture. One by one the dark wizards were dispatched and only after the last one fell did any of them notice the giant scull floating in the sky above the tower. *The Dark Mark.*

"Aww shit!" Seamus declared.

He was answered by Ron. "Bloody hell!"

"Voldemort." Harry announced, "He's here."

Dumbledore looked over his shoulder, "Let's all stay on our feet, shall we?"

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Suddenly dozens of Death eaters were crawling over the wall, pressing in, moving the smaller group back towards the doors. Another, more sinister presence loomed behind his minions. The figure waited until they were all in position before stepping to the front. He was even more substantial than Harry remembered, and as he advanced on Sara, Harry raised his wand.

Voldemort hissed, "It appears I have ruined your party, *Birthday Girl.*" He came to a stop a few feet

from her, Sara was shaking, but she stood her ground, looking him in the eye. She could feel her fear, but alien emotions crowded it out, strengthening her resolve. Harry's courage - and Draco's stubbornness. She clutched the Fortificus charm unconsciously.

Harry stepped in front of Sara and Voldemort laughed, hoarse and low as Harry held out his wand, his left hand reaching back to hold Sara's. Snape and McGonagall circled behind the evil wizard and Dumbledore came to stand at Harry's side.

In the blink of an eye Voldemort raised his wand and Harry was blasted off his feet and flying through the air, crash-landing near the doors before he knew what happened. Dumbledore had been knocked to the floor and curses from the other teachers, aimed at the Dark Lord were merely bouncing off, amounting to nothing. The rest of them, Hermione, Ron, and the other Gryffindors were holding off the Death eaters, but when Harry passed over their heads they became enraged and engaged the intruders in a full-fledged battle. The teachers, realizing they weren't causing Voldemort any harm, turned to help the students, leaving him to Sara and Dumbledore. The roof was a clamor of chaos. Dumbledore still struggling to his feet, Harry fighting his way back, Voldemort stepped closer, and Sara took a quick step back, bumping the gift table hard. Instinctually, she glanced behind her and saw the Orb was about to crash to the floor.

"Sara NO!!" Harry yelled, but it was too late, she'd caught it, and her fear instantly triggered the protective charm within the Orb. It's pinkish glow shot out in all directions, bright, but not glaring, leaving nothing in shadow.

Harry looked around, watching as wizards, dark or not, were throwing curses with no results. Many of them were gazing confusedly at their wands, some trying again only to get the same outcome.

Nothing. Harry then realized that he also had no magical power at the moment and the Death eaters were physically larger and stronger than any of them, except maybe Seamus and Snape. He could only hope someone was looking out for Hermione.

When Harry reappeared before Voldemort, again with the intent of protecting someone, he stood in front of Professor Dumbledore, old, frail, and vulnerable without his magic. Sara, being the only one present in possession of her full powers, Harry decided she could fend for herself.

Voldemort snickered and raised his wand at Harry once more, but Sara threw out her hand. Harry could hear pure venom in her voice as she recited a long curse in Latin, something he'd never heard. Voldemort staggered backward, but soon overcame it.

"Quickly, Sara!" Harry urged, "He has no powers!"

"Oh yes he does." She announced. "He can't hurt me, but he can hurt you. All of you. What do I do, Harry, help me!"

Harry hesitated, trying to come up with something, when a paper airplane came to a stop in front of his face and hovered there. He snatched it out of the air and pulled it open. It was only three words, but Harry's outlook on the situation improved dramatically.

Use your wand!

"You're next, *Harry Potter*." Voldemort hissed and rushed at Sara, meaning to plow into her to knock her down, but he never made it. Harry had his wand out and blew the unsuspecting Dark Lord off his feet to land hard against the wall.

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"Turn it off, Sara! Turn it off!" Harry yelled as he battered his arch-nemesis with every curse and spell that came to mind, but it would only work for so long.

Voldemort finally blocked Harry's attempts and was back on his feet, coming fast at Harry as Sara scrambled for the Orb. Harry fell to the hard stone under an impossibly powerful curse, but recovered quickly, knowing he'd left Dumbledore open to attack. He hurried to his feet, but Voldemort's wand had already found it's target. Harry instantaneously cast a blocking charm on Dumbledore, who was blasted by both wands at once, one to protect and one to harm. *Avada Kedavra* hit the elderly wizard hard, but fragmented into a hundred rays of sickly green light. Harry's blocking charm was enough to save his life, though not an impenetrable shield. As Dumbledore collapsed, Voldemort suddenly fell to his knees, and Sara got the Orb. Neville Longbottom stood behind the crippled dark wizard, his useless wand buried in the evil one's back. The magic returned to those who'd lost it, and Neville spoke one word "*Crucio!*".

Too surprised to block it, Voldemort cringed, unable to get to his feet, and tried to fight it off.

"Harry!" Dumbledore limped heavily, catching himself on Harry's shoulder, "Get me over there, Hurry! Get the others to follow."

"Professors!" Harry yelled. Snape and McGonagall took one look at Dumbledore and rushed over to give he and Harry cover from the few remaining Death eaters. Harry stopped at Voldemort's side, where Neville was twisting his wand, still driven deep into Voldemort's back, though very little blackish-red blood flowed from the wound. Dumbledore slipped to the ground, placed his hand on Neville's wand, and said "*Crucio!*"

Voldemort cried out in pain and began to struggle, though it was obviously difficult. Catching on quickly, Harry, Snape, and McGonagall plunged their wands into his back and spoke the Unforgivable Curse. Another wand pierced the bloody cloak and a familiar voice said the word. Little cracks of green light appeared like neon lightning throughout his form and Harry could hear Dumbledore reciting a spell in the old language. Harry placed his hand over Dumbledore's old wrinkled one and together they held the wand that performed the Magitite spell. The cracks instantly grew bigger and within seconds Voldemort exploded in a cloud of phosphorous little particles, otherwise known as Fairy Dust, or Magitite. A blur not quite like a ghost rushed past, and Harry knew it was over.

"It's about time...you joined us...Mr. Malfoy." Dumbledore said with pain in his tired, dusty voice, "I thought you were just going to...sit on that balcony...and enjoy the show!"

"You were killing Voldemort!" Draco grinned, "I can't let *Potter* get all the credit."

"We hardly *killed* him!" McGonagall snapped, her face full of exhausted resignation, "All we did tonight is take away his form. He's still alive, Draco.."

"That he is, Minerva." Dumbledore sighed.

"Harry." McGonagall said, looking across to where he knelt next to the injured Headmaster, "Send Sara's bird to Madam Pomfrey, we need her assistance."

"I'll go get her." Harry said and in a flash was on Malfoy's Lightning Mach 1. Harry turned toward the doors to Sara's rooms and opened them with his wand. He went straight down the center of the lighthouse-style spiral staircase as if chasing the snitch and blew the door at the bottom open and out of his way. Now in large, open corridors, he was able to push the fastest racing broom in existence to its limits. If someone happened to be standing nearby, all they would have seen was a blur as he sliced the air. Harry handled the broom with ease. The sharp turns into corridors would have been deadly to someone with less skill, but Harry flew gracefully.

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"MADAM POMFREY!!" He bellowed as he neared her room in the hospital wing. "MADAM POMFREY! GET UP!!!" He was flying too fast to use his wand, so he crashed into the door, using Draco's millionaire broom as a battering ram, driving it open and splintering the wood, but not the broom. He spun to a complete stop and hovered in the gloom of her bedroom. She was up, wearing a nightgown and pulling on a robe, a look of shock on her face that could only have been in response to his explosive entrance.

"Get on."

The grave look on his face coupled with the urgency in his voice caused the medi-witch to throw herself over the back of the broom without question. Harry immediately shot back into the corridor and prepared to pick up speed. "It's Dumbledore." He said without turning, and then almost as an afterthought, "Hold on tight."

Knowing full well how Harry flew a broom, Madam Pomfrey wrapped her arms around his waist and held on for dear life.

* * *

"It's the *worst* of the Unforgivable Curses." McGonagall explained to Madam Pomfrey, both kneeling on either side of Dumbledore, "We were all defenseless, all of us except *two children* and He-Who-Must-Not-be-Named. He tried to kill Albus."

"Harry saved my life." Dumbledore said, a small smile lighting his pale, weary face.

"You still got hurt." Harry said, looking more worried than he'd ever been in his life.

"Yes. But not *killed*."

Madam Pomfrey looked away from Dumbledore for the first time since her arrival. Seeing the bloody students gathered 'round in ruined clothes, with one hand holding the worst injury, the other holding somebody else's hand or slung around the slumped shoulders of a friend. She dispatched them all to the infirmary without delay. There were nurses there that could tend to their injuries. Sara stayed behind as she was unhurt, but Draco went with them, having sprained his ankle landing on the roof in his hurry to help kill Voldemort. He reclaimed his broom from Harry, who found his Firebolt, (not last year's model, but even older,) leaning against the wall with the rest of the brooms at the top of the stairs.

He didn't know why, but Draco waited for the rest of them, all Gryffindors he was supposed to despise and who totally loathed him, he was sure.

Hermione glared at him. "How the hell did *you* get hurt? You just showed up at the end, trying to steal some glory!"

"Jumped off my broom."

"Not exactly a battle wound." Ron sneered.

"Hurts just like one, though."

"Hermione? *What* are you holding?" Harry asked, noticing for the first time that she was covered in blood. It stained her dress, her hair, and her arms and face were splattered crimson. Ron looked much the same.

"A dagger." she said and sheathed it, sliding it into the wand pocket of her tattered silver cape. "The Orb takes our magic, remember? I'm small, Harry, I wasn't taking any chances. We both brought one. I can't believe you didn't think of it! Ron and I assumed it was the obvious thing to do."

"Hey!" Ron said, realization bloomed on his face, "How come *you* had magic?"

Harry turned and smiled at Malfoy, still hovering on his broom. "Someone must've had my back."

Malfoy returned Harry's smile.

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"Come on, people!" Seamus said, climbing on a school broom, "Let's go get fixed up. Neville, you ride with me. I know how you feel about brooms." he hesitated, "I feel like I got run over by the *Hogwarts Express*."

"No kidding!" Neville agreed, "We just *left* the infirmary a few hours ago!"

"I think the pepper-up potion is wearing off." Ron announced, "The last thing I feel right now is 'peppered-up'"

Everyone mounted a broom, all except Hermione, who stood for a moment, understanding widening her eyes. She faltered, then fainted.

"*HERMIONE!*" Harry and Ron rushed to her side.

"She's alright," Dean told them, "She's breathing."

Harry lifted her off the floor and Ron sat on his broom, reaching out his arms. Harry laid Hermione across his friend's lap and Ron held her to his chest.

"I thought you would protect her!" Harry suddenly yelled.

I tried!" Ron defended, "Harry, there were *so many* of them! She said she was fine!"

"Just go." Harry said, "And hurry."

"Follow me, Weasley." Draco said and took off at a pace Ron's school broom could keep. They were all in the air, single-file. Six Gryffindors and one Slytherin, leading the way for all of them.

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11. The Boiling Point

Harry awoke to the sound of voices whispering in the dim of the hospital wing. He was flat on his back, still a little sore, but feeling much better. Turning his head, he peered into the darkness, searching out Sara's shape in the vast room, for surely that was her whisper he heard. His eyes fell on her silhouette as she sat on the edge of Malfoy's bed, still wearing her party dress, and they were deep in discussion. Her back was mostly to the room, but Harry could tell she was toying with the Fortificus Charm around her neck.

Jealousy enveloped him as Sara clutched it, ran her finger along the lacy filigree. He remembered her astonishment when they'd opened it in the bathroom together. She'd touched it then, too, and looked at him with a questioning. He hated that he'd given her the Orb. The only birthday gift out of the dozens she'd received that had nearly been the end of every person she loved, himself included. The greatest wizard alive had nearly blinked out of existence. *Dumbledore*. Her uncle!

Malfoy, on the other hand, had given her jewelry, rare and expensive enough for Dumbledore to exclaim over. The kind of gift that means something. Unlike a *crystal ball*. Especially a *very dangerous* one. He felt certain she would never really forgive him. She would say she did, but the memory would linger forever, like a scar.

He turned his head to Hermione in the next bed, sleeping peacefully thanks to one of Snape's dreamier sleeping potions, not the standard children's formula normally given to students. Ron was in bed with her, to no great surprise, stretched out behind her under the covers, his arm slung around her slim frame. And Hermione lay on her side, knees slightly pulled up, elbows bent, her small hand curled into Ron's larger one.

Harry sighed as he looked on his two best friends. That was his other disastrous inclination of the night. Yelling at Ron, accusing him of letting Hermione come to harm while they were outnumbered at least three to one. And to be wrong on top of that! Hermione hadn't collapsed due to any injury (though she had been hurt) but from shock. The fact that she had just sliced, stabbed, and killed several people was too much in the moment it all came psychologically crashing down.

His eyes found Sara again, only this time she was speaking with a soothing tone, a comforting hand over Draco's. He wished he could make out what they were saying, but given Malfoy's popularity with the Gryffindors, Madam Pomfrey had put him all the way across the room. He really didn't need to spend the night, not for a sprained ankle, but he'd insisted on staying and Madam Pomfrey was too preoccupied to argue.

Harry hadn't spoken to Draco since they'd left the tower and his anger rose at the sight of her hand on his. He hated that Sara had accepted his apology. He was even a little sorry he'd given Malfoy his blood. True it had saved several lives, including his own and Dumbledore's, but now Harry owed him. He was certainly indebted to the worst creep at Hogwarts, there was no question, but what Harry really wanted was answers. And for things to go back to normal. He didn't want a friend in Draco Malfoy.

He also wanted to crush the Fortificus charm into a thousand pieces. He hated it, even though it benefited Sara. His blood side-by-side with Malfoy's around anyone's neck would be bad enough, but not hers. He didn't want Draco or his Slytherin blood anywhere near Sara. Him or his expensive, beautiful, *impeccably thoughtful* gift. A gift he knew Harry couldn't afford. Seeing them whispering together in the light of a single candle and making physical contact, no matter how innocent, brought an edge to his usually placid countenance.

"*Inflamare*." He whispered and his candle came to life, casting a warm glow on his features and masking his anger. They turned toward him at once and Harry noticed how good they looked together. Both blonde, striking and blue eyed, fine featured and with flawless, porcelain skin. They could be brother and sister. (But they weren't.) The tips of her fingers, he saw, touched the charm around her neck.

"Morning, Potter." Draco smirked.

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Harry gave him an expressionless glance, but otherwise ignored him. "Sara," he said, wanting to demand she *not* sit on Malfoy's bed, *not* try to comfort him, but his anger had turned to insecurity, "How are the teachers? How's Dumbledore?" His tone conveyed only concern and inquiry, though he desperately wanted her to leave Draco's bedside and come to his.

She made no motion to move and said "They're alright." Her hand dropped into her lap when she realized it lingered around the pendant. And she smiled at him half-heartedly, her eyes, even in the dim light of two candles and the dark expanse, looked on him with sympathy and something akin to pity. "They're banged-up a bit, but just fine. Professor Dumbledore already looks better."

"I can't hear you." Harry lied, "Come here."

Malfoy grinned and chuckled loudly, making no attempt to hide the display. The blood rushed to

Harry's face as resentment burned in his mind. He wanted to jump out of bed and wipe the smirk of Malfoy's face, but what would Sara think of him then?

A nurse came into the room on shoes charmed for silence. She never looked at Harry, but went straight to Sara and Draco. She whispered, but somehow maintained a stern tone of voice. "If you want to laugh, Mr. Malfoy, you can do it in your dormitory."

"Something was funny. What did you expect me to do?"

Even Harry could feel the weight of her glare.

"Fine." Draco sighed, "Good night, Sara."

"Goodnight, Malfoy." Sara stood. The nurse went to check on Neville.

"You *can* call me Draco, you know."

"My response is the same as before, Malfoy." Sara said without much of a smile, "I'd rather not."

Harry sat cross-legged in bed, the blankets pooled around his waist. She climbed onto the covers and sat in front of him, her hand went to the back of his neck and she looked at him in the candlelight. Pulling him forward, she let her forehead rest against his. Eyes falling closed, she sighed. "I almost lost you, Harry. I almost lost *everyone*."

His anger melted. "It's all my fault. I should have told you about the Orb"

"I knew what it was." she pulled away to look at him, "It was the light when I touched it. I couldn't believe my eyes! Harry, I've wanted the Orb of Arassel since I was a little girl. It's the thing I've coveted most, all of my life. I never expected to find it, of course, but *you* found it, Harry. And you gave it to me."

"I almost got Dumbledore killed."

"No. *I* almost got *both of you* killed. Like I said, I knew what it was. I was more worried about the Orb coming to harm than I was about our safety, which was stupid, since it won't break."

"The woman who sold it to me, she didn't know anything about it."

"I hope you didn't spend too much. We have our house to think about."

"No. Not *too* much." he attempted a smile, then sighed, "*Happy Birthday, Sara.*"

"Two students in the same bed!?" the nurse exclaimed, hurrying over to Ron's sleeping form.

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Leave them alone!"

"Excuse me, Mr. Potter?"

"You *don't* know what they've been through. They aren't hurting anything." he added, "*They're asleep!*"

The nurse sighed. "Well, alright. But I'll be keeping an eye on them." She turned and noiselessly left the room.

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"Harry, *how on Earth* did you escape the defense charm? Surely they didn't give you the spell?"

Never in a million years would he admit to her that Draco had saved him. "I don't know." he said, which was partially true. "I didn't know I could still use my wand. I thought I was without magic, like everyone else."

"And how did Voldemort resist?"

"I think I was set up to buy the Orb. I think he put it in my path. Or in yours. I don't know. How could they know we would go to that particular store?"

"It wouldn't be hard, if they had the Orb. After all, I'm not the *only* clairvoyant around. Anyone could use it as a crystal ball." Sara considered this and her tone softened. "Harry, this is *not* your fault." She stood, lifted the covers, and climbed in. Harry slid down beside her and this time it was him curling up to her, his head on her shoulder. "You're shivering." She pulled the blankets up and held him close, resting her cheek against his hair. "*It's okay, Harry.*"

* * *

"Wake up, Potter!"

He was being shaken, so he knew immediately that it wasn't Sara. Harry opened his eyes to find Malfoy staring down at him with serious, nervous eyes.

"Where's Sara?" Harry asked while slipping on his glasses.

"She left a little while ago." Draco informed him, "It's time to fill you in."

"What do you mean?"

"Potter, just shut-up and let me speak."

Harry sat up and waited. Draco glanced at the foot of the bed, hesitated, then pulled up a chair. When he spoke, it was rushed, and in hushed whispers.

"None of this was my idea. I was approached, and asked to get some of your blood. At first I agreed, but like I said before, I didn't want to be responsible for your death. I made him tell me what it was for. This may surprise you, but Voldemort never had the Orb, Potter."

"He must have! How else would he know I had it?"

"He knew Sara was in Diagon Alley and was having her watched. You were followed as well, and they saw what you bought."

"So that's it!" Harry said.

"Voldemort knew the object the spy described and devised a plan to get his blood into the Orb and then force Sara to use it, that way he could easily do away with you." Malfoy glanced around and lowered his voice even more. "That's where Morgio comes in."

"*I knew it!*"

"He was lying, Potter. He *did* find Voldemort, or shall I say Voldemort found him. He held out for awhile under their torture, but in a moment of weakness, pledged his allegiance and was given the

Dark Mark as a result."

"A Deatheater! I *knew* there was a reason I didn't trust him."

"Would you *shut-up* and listen? He remained for three years, eventually becoming a faithful and trusted minion, but always looking to find a way out. He thought he had it when he was asked to return to the Ministry, convince them he'd been unsuccessful, and obtain a teaching position at Hogwarts, which he did. You see, Potter, if Voldemort found out Morgio was trying to help you, trying to spoil his plans, he'd have had him killed."

"But Ron and the others! Morgio gave them that potion? That was *helping*?"

"No, that was Wormtail." Draco's eyes skittered around the room.

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"*Rodents*." Harry said thoughtfully. "I should have known!"

"He's the one that put Voldemort's blood in the Orb. That's why I asked you to step outside."

Harry's eyes widened. "*You!* I can't believe I trusted you."

"I *had* to do it. If I didn't Morgio would be dead. Wormtail knew I had a deal with him. We had to go along with it."

"Then why did I have magic?"

"Because, you idiot, I put your blood in the Orb. Morgio copied the spell out of the Ministry's book."

"Malfoy?" Harry rubbed his eyes, glancing at the dusky light of dawn filtering in through the windows, "Couldn't this have waited until later?"

"Potter, Morgio's dead."

* * *

Harry lay alone in Sara's bed, wearing only his pajama bottoms. The night was warm for October and he was depressed.

It was a Friday night and normally there would be people here. Hermione and Ron, Seamus, Dean, and Neville, along with a half-dozen other Gryffindors. Ravenclaws came in groups and maybe even a few Hufflepuffs would venture out after hours. Every week people came to Sara's tower, dressed in their finer casual attire, and drank Seamus' rum which lately, was turning out quite decent. They sat around in couples, some in dark corners, listening to music on the stereo. Sometimes they would dance, especially after a few batches of rum, but mostly they just had a good time.

This Friday, however, Sara was late. She'd gone to meet Malfoy hours ago and hadn't returned. Harry wanted to go find her, but she'd asked him not to. She'd even taken the Marauder's Map so he couldn't use it to check on her, at least that's what he felt. He was worried, yes, but not about her safety. It had been over a month since the Ministry had concluded their investigation, ruling Morgio's death a result of battle, (though he had been in his bed, nowhere near the roof and had been killed after the Dark Lord had been defeated.) In all that time Draco had behaved himself, posing no danger to Sara, though Harry still felt threatened every time Sara mentioned him, or they met in the hall. Especially when they took off together for hours at a time. He trusted Sara, but not Malfoy. Harry saw the way he looked at her.

Once again someone knocked and he ignored it. Voices called thought the door, then footsteps descended back down the stairs. Harry didn't want company. He lay in the dark, the wind blowing in through the open doors, softly playing one of Sara's more melancholy collections.

Sara's actions of late had confused him. She occasionally met Malfoy in the room on the second floor and asked Harry to trust her, which he did, but when the female students, (who were finding him attractive all of a sudden,) paid attention to him, Sara acted hurt. He did the same over Malfoy, he was sure, but when that happened Sara told him not to be ridiculous. How could he not react? Malfoy was in love with her, it was blatantly apparent, and she acted as if their relationship was perfectly harmless. Malfoy was trying to draw her in, lure her away. Of this Harry was sure and it troubled him a great deal. After all, it was easy to see where Sara could prefer Malfoy over him. Harry wasn't rich like Draco was. Didn't have his blonde good looks, either, or his irresistible-to-all-females, gracefully aggressive, bad-boy attitude.

And it wasn't just Draco. Sara was the object of desire for many male students. She was so friendly and charming and she looked fantastic. A cleverly sultry, classic beauty with great taste in clothes. They practically swarmed around her. She got owls all the time bearing letters and sometimes small gifts (which she always returned) and Harry got angry glances.

The same thing happened to him, though, and he couldn't control it, so he didn't get upset with Sara when it happened to her. Girls who had always ignored him would flirt excessively now and he couldn't bring himself to be rude, just unresponsive. And most of them were rude to Sara. He'd even gotten a letter from Cho Chang, who's little sister had taken Harry's Potions class.

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Of this new twist in their relationship Harry was understanding. It happened to both of them and it was uninvited. Malfoy, though, was a different story. Malfoy made him nervous.

Harry rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. Did Sara still love him? Were these secret meetings of hers justifiable? Or was it a test of sorts, to strengthen some insecurity of hers? That seemed very unlikely. Sara was beyond game-playing, he thought. Perhaps she simply found Malfoy intriguing. Then again, perhaps she wondered what it was like to kiss someone else? This thought he shoved back, refusing to even consider it. Thoughts like that could be dangerous, especially when one is already in questioning. He sighed as ugly images of Sara kissing Malfoy tried to push their way to the front. Harry threw back the covers and jumped out of bed. He just wouldn't think about it. He found a bottle of Seamus' rum, left over from last Friday, and pulled out the stopper. Raising the

flask to his lips, he took a sip and grimaced, his eyes squeezed shut. Harry hated the taste of liquor and longed for the smooth burn of the Riesling. Since that was locked in Dumbledore's office, this would have to do.

He took a big gulp of rum, pulled on a light summer cloak and headed toward the roof, stopping to turn the stereo up. It was Sara's music, which she played constantly. The artist's last name was unremembered, but her first name was Sarah, which Harry recalled for obvious reasons. It was kind of 'by women, for women' music, but it appealed to him, even before they'd danced to one of the songs on Sara's birthday. Now he found he loved it, and advanced the cd to that particular song. It was to the soft sounds of a piano that he wandered out under the stars, sipping along the way.

Being the beginning of fall, the cushions were still on the chaise lounges and Harry collapsed into one and peered up at the sky, his head resting against the back. The liquor, which had at first tasted like a mouthful of diesel, was going down a little easier. The music he'd played stirred his feelings and he found himself looking out on the expanse of the roof, his mind drifting back. Sara, looking magnificent as they danced under a cloud of luminous dust on a warm September night, her blue eyes smiling up at him through a tangle of gossamer roses. The arm around his back held him closer and she'd rested her head on his shoulder, whispering the sweetest words. Something twisted inside him and he was suddenly overcome with love for her, prompting another quick swallow from the flask. Harry was startled out of his reverie by movement on the roof. Something had landed, but he didn't bother to turn his head. "Voldemort?" he called out, *"I'm not getting up."*

"It's me, shithead." Malfoy grinned from the end of the chaise lounge, holding his Lightning Mach 1 and looking down on Harry. "Are you drinking, Potter? How unhero-like."

"Shut-up, Malfoy." Harry's words already came out slightly slurred, "Done hitting on my girlfriend? Thought you'd drop by and let me know?"

"You're really off your rocker, Potter. Anyway, I am supposed to tell you that Sara will be awhile longer. I guess she has something to do."

"That's wonderful, goodbye."

"You really are an idiot." Malfoy defended, "And it looks like I'm crashing your pity party, so I think I'll be off. Have fun drowning yourself."

"Yes, why don't you ride that stupid damn broom of yours straight to hell, Malfoy."

"You don't swear well, Potter. Perhaps you should re-think your profanity. Stupid damn broom?"

Really!"

"Or perhaps you'd like your nose re-broken."

"I'd accept that invitation if I didn't think I'd have to fight you leaning over that chair."

"Then go away. Leave me alone."

"Harry," Draco said as he mounted his broom and hovered, "Don't be foolish. She loves you." He was gone before Harry could open his mouth to speak.

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* * *

He didn't know how long it had been since Malfoy left, but at some point he had instructed the stereo to play the same song continuously, and it helped him slip into his present frame of mind. He was angry at Sara for not caring how she made him feel. He was hating Malfoy, and the more he drank, the more upset he became. He had never been mad at Sara and was even more bothered by the fact that she was knowingly acting in a way that would play on his emotions. He wanted her to love only him and forsake all others, especially Draco Malfoy. Harry didn't consider himself the possessive sort, but it was the real, deep-rooted truth.

He raised the flask to find it empty and threw it at the wall. Falling short, it shattered on the floor with a satisfying explosion of tinkling crystal. Harry muttered and wrapped his cloak around his bare chest in the cooler, middle-of-the-night air.

He didn't sense her presence or hear her come in and was startled when she knelt beside him, still in the chaise lounge, the back raised like a hospital bed. She could smell the rum, it clung to him like a cloud and, combined with his choice of hauntingly emotional music, it worried her. She laid a hand on his arm.

"I'm sorry." She whispered, "I had no idea it was affecting you this way."

Harry turned his swimming eyes to hers, blue as rare gems and full of unshed tears. His face was expressionless. He still felt angry, but her presence had always calmed him and it did so now, only not enough. Suddenly he felt lost, uncertain, and hurt, desperate for assurance. He looked away.

"I don't want to talk to you."

"Please, Harry. Come inside. We need to talk."

"Did you not hear me?"

"I know that you're angry, but I think you should let me explain."

"If you're breaking up with me, just say so. Spare me the long, bullshit explanations."

"Harry, I've never seen you this way. You're scaring me. Stop it right now and come inside. I'm not breaking up with you, that's just plain nonsense! I love you!"

"Do you?" Harry finally looked at her, "Sometimes it's hard to tell."

Sara shrank before the hurt and anger she saw in his usually kind eyes. Her hand went to the charm around her neck. "Why are you doing this?"

"What do you expect me to do, Sara?" Harry suddenly yelled, pushing himself into a sitting position, his feet finding the floor, "You spend *hours* with Malfoy, who's totally in love with you, you won't tell me why or where you're going! You even took the map so I couldn't spy on you! And then you

have the nerve to ask for my trust! What am I supposed to do? Demand you not see him? Act like a jealous idiot? How could you even put me in that position?"

"Harry, that's not it at all! I took the map so I could protect you! If you saw us leave school grounds you would have followed us and I couldn't let you do that! And of course I expect you to trust me!"

"You left?" Harry was incredulous, "*With him?* I can't believe this! Where did you go?"

"To Malfoy Manor. I borrowed your broom."

"This is too much." he laid back down and flung an arm over his eyes. "Why are you pushing me like this, Sara? Why did you lie to me?"

"I didn't lie to you. And I kept this from you for justifiable reasons."

"And what would they be? Really, I can't wait to hear this."

"Harry, you're drunk and you're not yourself. I can't talk to you like this. You don't *want* to believe me and you're being very nasty. Just come to bed and we'll talk in the morning."

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"I am myself. And I don't want to share bed with you. Why don't you go back to Malfoy's house, I'm sure he'd accommodate you."

Her voice grew very small, choked, and tears spilled down her cheeks. "Harry," she whispered. "*how could you?!*"

He looked at her, face broken with misery and wet with tears, and his anger dissolved. She choked back sobs as thunder rumbled and rain splashed the roof, desperate not to cry like this in front of him. Harry suddenly felt as if she'd plunged a dagger into his heart and he clumsily hurried to the floor beside her, grabbed her and held her to his chest. He wrapped his arms around her as she cried into his shoulder, wishing he could take it all back. "I'm sorry, Sara," he whispered, burying his face in her hair, "I'm so sorry."

* * *

"We need to talk, Harry." Sara said, her tone despondent. Her voice soft and sweetened by sadness.

"There's hangover potion by your candle."

She had her back to him, sitting on the edge of the bed, feet on the floor, hands in her lap. One held a tissue. "I'm sorry," he offered, "I shouldn't have drank so much. Sara, I didn't mean to hurt you." He slipped on his glasses and sat up, pausing to empty the cup. "I didn't know what to do."

"It's not your fault, Harry."

Her hushed, tearful voice brought back ugly memories of last night and Harry swallowed a lump in his throat. "I had no right to accuse you of anything. I don't really believe you'd make off with Malfoy. I was jealous, Sara. Jealous like never before and I couldn't handle it."

"It's my fault you felt that way. I never stopped to think how you might see things. I know how you feel about him, Harry, and I know how he feels about me. I should have told you everything, but I was afraid."

"You don't have to hide things from me."

"Harry, this is different. If I'd told you what this was about, you would never have stood aside. The problem was, including you would have put you in danger. It would have put *all of us* in danger."

"I'll do whatever you say, just tell me what this is about. Please, Sara, before I lose my mind and you along with it."

Sara turned to face him with red, blotchy eyes, apparently from hours of crying. Harry wondered if she'd slept and felt even worse, if that was possible.

"It all started when I read Malfoy's palm," she began, "Actually, just before that. I noticed right away that his aura was different, changed in a way that was for the better and wasn't at the same time. It became clear when I touched him that he'd undergone some unspeakable trauma, something so profound that it had changed the very way he thinks. I sensed he was walking a fine line and was about to fall headfirst to one side or the other and was searching for a wider path. Do you follow me?"

"I think so. You mean he was at a crossroads."

"Pretty much, but it goes deeper than that. It's a soul decision, but he was desperately in need of guidance, a time bomb of uncertainty, really. He needed someone to talk to who wouldn't judge him. Someone he trusted."

"He *just happened* to pick you?"

"The other way around. He was carrying this secret around with him, eating him up and unable to do anything about it. He hadn't told a soul. I saw what was coming and had to step in. It's why I asked you to wait outside."

"So you're his *confidant*?" Harry felt his anger rise a little, "Is this supposed to make me feel better?"

"Harry, he was going to kill his father."

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Harry just stared at her, dumbstruck.

"He was leaning away from the inclinations that have defined generations of Malfoys, rebelling I guess, and finally said something his father took to heart. What followed was a terrible beating I will not describe and when his mother tried to stop it, Lucius struck her, too. Up until this point Malfoy had been too stunned to fight back, but seeing his mother assaulted pushed him over the edge."

"He defended her. I can only imagine how Lucius felt about that."

"In retaliation, Lucius dragged her down into the cellar, threw her into something resembling a prison cell, locked her up and told Malfoy to consider her dead if he was defiant again."

"But she's *his wife*!"

"She remained there until last night, nothing more than a control mechanism for father to use against

son."

"He's been walking around school all this time, acting normal, knowing his mother was down there."

Harry lowered his eyes, not knowing how to feel. "You'd never know anything was bothering him."

"Do you understand now why I had to help him? I was the only one that knew what he was thinking."

"So you freed her."

"I did. Malfoy got me into the house, but he was unable to get past the hatch to the cellar. His father had placed wards there to keep him out."

"But wasn't she guarded? You just walked in and let her out?"

"Of course she was guarded." Sara smiled, "That was why I wouldn't allow you to come along, Harry."

"Ok, now I'm lost."

"I easily defeated Lucius' guard, transfigured him, and turned him over to the Ministry of Magic anonymously. Well, Draco's mother turned him in"

"I'm still missing something."

"First, there are wards up all over Malfoy Manor designed to spring traps and sound alarms if Harry Potter tries to enter. The only way in for you is through the front door. Second, the guard over Mrs. Malfoy was Peter Pettigrew. Your old pal Wormtail. Harry, Sirius is a free man."

Harry just looked at her, wishing he could believe it.

"I thought you'd be happy?" she worried, "Did I say something wrong?" she waited while he gathered his thoughts.

"I've celebrated Sirius' freedom too many times, only to have it slip away again. I can't, no *I won't* believe it until it's announced by the Ministry."

"Then know it *might* happen. He was last seen in the custody of the Ministry of Magic. This is a good thing, Harry!"

"Speaking of which, why didn't you bring him *here*? The Ministry is corrupt, Sara. Dumbledore would have made sure Wormtail came to justice." he looked away, "Besides, he owes me for sixteen years of life with the Dursleys. I would have liked a few hours alone with him."

"So you understand why I couldn't tell you."

He considered this, then climbed off the bed so he could face her properly. "I do understand why you did what you did. But that doesn't mean I agree with you. Believe it or not, I am capable of controlling myself."

"Like last night?" She was standing now, too and he paced the floor before her as he spoke.

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"If I was going *with* you, I wouldn't have gotten too drunk to walk. I was drunk because I *wasn't* going."

"Harry," she lowered her eyes, the memory painful, "You were so horrible last night. You've never talked to me that way. Never, drunk or not. I thought I'd lost you. I thought you hated me and it was over with us. I was more afraid then I have ever been of Voldemort and it spoiled something in me that can never be the same. An image I had of you."

"Let me guess, *The Boy Who Lived*? The *famous* Harry Potter?" He leisurely paced the floor in front of her, "The boy who never acts like an idiot, never let's his imagination over-run his common sense? The boy who never, ever gets drunk and says a bunch of stupid stuff that he doesn't really mean? Doesn't get jealous or hurt anyone's feelings? He doesn't exist, Sara! I'm not perfect. I'm glad I ruined your image because it isn't fair to hold *anyone* up to those standards! I'm not trying to make what I did alright. I really was horrible to you. That's true, and I've never been so sorry." he lowered his voice and found her eyes, "I can't help thinking that you'll never forgive me. Sara, I don't know how to fix this."

"Well, enough with the excuses and the self-pity, Harry," she took up the pacing where he left off, "because they aren't winning you any points right now. Why did you start drinking to begin with? Were you thinking terrible thoughts about me and decided to drown your sorrow? Make me sorry when I finally got done shagging Malfoy in the Astronomy Tower? What's behind all this? What's the *real* problem?"

"It's *him*! Him and his mansion and his expensive gifts! How can I compete with that? I could never take care of you the way he can."

"Little inferiority complex, Harry? Do you really think I'm that shallow? I'm not running a contest, you know." She laughed, incredulous, "Blonde and rich he is. He's also egotistical, self-centered, narcissistic, completely annoying, and a *Slytherin*. I loath him."

"Why didn't you tell me any of this before?"

"I couldn't talk to you about Malfoy." she sat back down on the bed and he joined her. "I shouldn't have told you what I already have. I broke a promise today, Harry, and that's a hard thing for me to accept, but keeping it wasn't worth losing you. I asked you to trust me and you did your best."

"It was Malfoy I didn't trust, Sara. I know what his interests are. I guess I thought he might have found away to win you over."

"He's charming in his own way, but he's no Harry Potter." she gave him a weak smile and sighed, "I know that you're sorry, and I know that the kind of person you really are would have to be pushed pretty damn far to react the way you did. That's my fault, Harry, I pushed you too far. I love you and I'm sorry. I know we'll get over this, but right now this is not okay with me."

"It's not ok with me, either, but don't tell me you need time alone because I'm not leaving until both of us feel better."

"Harry, I don't need *time alone*. I can do my thinking just fine with you right here beside me. Let's start a fire. The warm front brought the rain and damp."

"Sara," he said as he led her to the sofa and unfolded a blanket, "You never asked me *why* I was cruel to you."

"I know why." the blanket and his arm went around her shoulders and she clasped her hands at the small of his back, "You were pushing me away because you wanted me to feel your misery, understand how hurt you were. But you were also afraid."

"I was terrified." He admitted and lowered them both to the sofa, "Somehow my mind made everything I was thinking seem true, or at least probable. I thought you were leaving me. It was awful, the most desperate feeling."

"I'm not leaving you, remember?" She smiled, sniffled, and held up her palm. "Our paths lie together."

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* * *

Harry climbed over Sara, sound asleep and stretched out along the outside of the sofa, her peaceful face aglow in the firelight. He had been snug and comfy wedged between Sara and the back of the couch, but now someone was at the door and they knocked a second time.

Hermione and Ron took one look at Harry and burst out laughing. A glance in a near-by mirror reminded him that he was shirtless still, wearing only his pajama bottoms, his hair sticking up all wild and confused, as if it didn't know which way to go.

"We got tattoos!" Hermione announced and showed Harry her ankle. "Ron's is on his chest, but it's the same thing."

Harry knelt to examine the mark on her outer ankle. It's a crest," he observed, "An owl and a knight flanking the Gryffindor lion. Cool, Hermione! And Ron has one, too?"

"It hurt like bloody hell!"

"Surely it wasn't that bad." Hermione rolled her eyes. "We're going to put it over our front door someday, aren't we Ron?"

"Yes, Hermione."

"Not this summer?" Harry wondered.

"We're renting a flat at the end of the year. Sara's lawyer is lining up a few places for us to look at near the Ministry. Low budget, of course, because we need to save for a house. Our crest will have to wait awhile, I guess. Putting a crest over an apartment door is like wearing a silk shirt with sweat pants."

"I see."

"Harry?" Ron wondered, "What do you and Sara have planned for after school?"

"I don't know, really. We might get someplace on the coast. Get jobs."

Hermione was incredulous. "You're not going to play Quidditch for England?!"

"No. Maybe in the future, it's just not what I want to do right now."

"Well," Hermione smiled, "We asked for a flat with another for rent nearby, just in case you wanted to join us."

"We'll see." Harry smiled, "Thanks. And I like your tattoos."

"Why didn't you guys come to Hogsmead? We had a great time, you really missed out." She added as she and Ron took a seat in the little parlor just inside the door. "Pansy Parkinson fell face first in the mud. It was hilarious."

"Did you hear about Malfoy?" Ron asked.

Harry glanced over his shoulder at the couch. "What did he do now?"

"He's missing," Ron tried not to smile, "They found a note in his room, it was from his father."

"His father?" Harry grew worried, "What did it say?"

Hermione interjected, "Lavender and Patty got Crabbe to tell them on the way back from Hogsmead." she grinned, "It said his mother had made it home safe and that he didn't have to worry about her anymore. Can you imagine Malfoy getting all worried? It's silly, the thought. He's like ice, Harry, he doesn't worry about *anyone*."

"Except himself." Ron added.

Harry had gone white. "Excuse me." He said and hurried across the rooms to the sofa where Sara lay in exactly the position he'd left her.

"Sara, wake up!" He whispered, "*Sara!*"

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"I'm tired." She mumbled and tried to go back to sleep.

"Malfoy's in trouble." he glanced at Ron and Hermione, but they were chatting animatedly and paying no attention to him whatsoever. He turned back to Sara, who was trying to open her eyes.

She groaned. "What'd he do now?"

"He's missing," Harry said and Sara perked up. "There was a note from Lucius that said his mother was home and it sounds like he's planning to do something unspeakable. I think Malfoy went to save her and if he did it's a trap."

"Oh dear," she sighed, "What do we do? Harry, we aren't even dressed!"

Ron yelled from the open parlor. "Harry? Are you coming back or do you two want us to slip out quietly and lock the door?"

"Actually," Hermione grinned as she entered the bedroom and approached the sofa, "Ron and I might want to retire to our room for awhile, if that's alright with you, Sara."

"You never need to ask, it's your room, remember?"

"It's your tower!"

"It's why we levitated the beds in, isn't it?"

"Sara," Ron wondered, "Do you think anyone will notice? That we took all the furniture? I mean the storage room is practically bare!"

"Trust me, Ron. *No one* goes into that room. This tower used to be guest quarters for the Tri-Wizard Tournaments years ago. The room across the hall is where they piled all the stuff that was on this side of the tower. Use the door at the bottom of the stairs. It opens onto the back stairway. Password is 'Speedo'."

In fact, several of the empty spaces below Sara's rooms had been transformed into Friday night crash quarters for the throng of drunken students who didn't dare try to get back to their dorms, or just plain wanted to be alone. Ron and Hermione had been given the door next to the music room, just at the bottom of the steps past the kitchen. The others were further into the lower floors, behind a door that was locked once Sara decided to call it night. Only this week, there had been no party and Ron and Hermione had missed their night alone.

"We'll see you later, then." Hermione smiled. "Don't forget the library in the morning! We're working on our spell books!"

As soon as they heard footsteps on the back stairs Sara and Harry returned to the matter at hand. What to do about Malfoy.

"Let's just tell Dumbledore or Snape. They'll know what to do." Harry said, the realization that he was going to have to rescue Draco becoming clearer by the second. "We should really pass this off to someone in charge."

"Harry, you aren't scared of big bad Lucius Malfoy are you?"

"Scared, no. But he *is* a little intimidating."

"He can't be all that bad. Can he?"

"Sara, have you ever *met* Lucius Malfoy?"

"No, but I've heard about him. Voldemort's stool pigeon, isn't he?"

"It's what I've been told. He's supremely evil, yet he can be charming if he wants and he's, uh, the girls say he's very good looking."

"Of course Draco's father would be good looking. He didn't learn such conceit from just anybody. Is he also blond?"

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"Yes, only his hair is more white than Draco's, and it's long. He carries a snake-headed cane and he's taller than me, but not by much. He's always dressed to kill. No pun intended."

"Interesting." Sara considered this new information, "And Draco told me that he knew his father had affairs. Harry, I think I have a plan."

"No." Harry grew animate, "*No way in hell, Sara!*"

"You don't think I could pull it off?"

"Of course you can, that's not the point! You don't know how he is, there's no telling what he'll do. I don't want you to rely on outsmarting him. It's not a good idea."

"Don't be silly, Harry! Besides, how do we get in if not through the front door? Draco took a million spells off the entrance we went through and I certainly don't remember them all. I need a wand, though, something I won't need to return."

"Ron still has his old broken one. But that would mean asking him for it."

"It's broken?"

"Yes, everything backfires."

"Perfect. We'll steal it, though. You will, anyway."

"I will not! *Sara!*"

"Are you going to go knock on their door right now?"

"No way."

"Then the only other options are to wait until they come out, which could be tomorrow for all we know, or just go back to your room and take it out of his trunk. Harry, he's your friend. He won't mind."

"He's my friend because we respect each other's property. I'm not comfortable rifling through his trunk."

"Harry, someone's life may be in danger."

Harry sighed, defeated by her once again. "Well when you put it that way. I'll be back."

He quickly changed into last night's clothes and slipped out the door, riding his Firebolt to the bottom of the tower. He was nervous about the plan they'd come up with.

When he'd left, Sara had been placing the Orb on the little table where they ate their meals. He thought she planned to inquire about Malfoy, but he hoped it was to see the night ahead. Sara wouldn't do that, he figured, she refused look at the future. She'd told him once that only the past comes in clearly, the future is clouded, broken and full of misleading, dream-like imagery that should never be regarded as fact.

He found himself standing at the end of Ron's bed, looking down on his trunk, which Harry opened and rummaged through. He'd seen the box Ron kept the old wand in many times and had no difficulty finding it and stashed it under the pillow on his own bed while he threw on some warmer clothes.

Flying on an October night could be quite crisp and he had no interest in freezing to death. He found a pair of gloves, threw a heavy black cloak around his shoulders, and stowed the broken wand, box and

all, in one of the many inside pockets. Thinking of Malfoy, who wouldn't really be expecting a rescue effort, Harry tossed a heavy sweater into his backpack, as well as his invisibility cloak, and an extra pair of gloves. His own wand he slid into it's pocket and felt to make sure he had Sara's Confidall. He had a feeling he might be needing it.

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An hour and a half had passed since they'd lifted off from the roof of the tower and finally stood outside the dark, looming presence that was Malfoy Manor. Harry's backpack was open on the grass and he tossed his gloves into it, the invisibility cloak wedged between his knees. Sara was changing cloaks. She'd worn a heavy one and put a lighter, fancier cloak in his bag.

"Sara!" Harry said, his eyes widening, "Wow! What are you wearing?"

"What, this?" she indicated the cropped sweater and black satin skirt she wore under the cloak, "Do you think it's, I don't know, *seductive* enough?"

"You don't want to know what I think," Harry grinned, "unless you have a spot behind the bushes in mind." Sara blushed and Harry grew more serious. "But do you really think it's necessary for Lucius Malfoy to look at your stomach?" he poked a gentle finger into the whisper of flesh exposed there, "and it's a little..."

"A little what?"

"Um, *low-cut*."

Sara laughed and as she did Harry noticed the way the color of her sweater brought out the blue of her eyes and the garment itself looked so soft that his fingers found their way to it and then his arm was moving around her back. Her hand slipped into his hair and he pulled her so close she could hardly catch her breath and his kiss was as thrilling as it was passionate and she pulled him closer, loving the feel of being crushed against him. A powerlessness stole over her and she melted into him with a sigh. The aggression in his manor was something which had only recently manifested and it awakened something in her that was too strong to contend with. Something intense and undeniable. A desire which obliterated her resolve and turned her legs to jelly. At times like these, when he reminded her most of the fearless seeker who'd won the Quidditch Cup, she was defenseless. She wondered if he knew.

With her eyes still closed and breathless, she let her head fall against his shoulder and felt his cheek press against her hair.

"Sara." He whispered, "*Be careful*."

Harry stood close behind her on the step as she rang the bell and composed herself. It was answered rather quickly and Sara looked up in surprise. The tall, handsome platinum blond, dressed from head to toe in black, could only be Lucius Malfoy. Sara felt suddenly nervous. Harry had been right. The man was intimidating. However, his lips curled in a smile as Sara pushed back her hood and her hair spilled down around her. She trained her eyes on Lucius and summoned her sweetest smile.

Lucius purred, "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"I'm sorry to bother you, Mr. Malfoy." Sara began, "But I was looking for Draco. I'm a friend of his and I thought he might be here."

"Did you now?" Lucius' smile widened, "Come inside, dear girl, let me get a better look at you." Sara stepped over the threshold and felt Harry brush inside behind her.

"He told me everything, you see." She looked at Lucius with sympathy. "Then, when he got your letter he said he had to go home. It's late, I know I shouldn't have come, but I was worried about him."

"What do you mean, *he told you everything*?" Lucius goaded.

She lowered her voice, as if revealing a secret. "About how Mrs. Malfoy was bitten by the werewolf, sir. About having to lock her away until the full moon passes. I'm sorry to hear it. It must be so hard on you." She laid a comforting hand on his arm. "If there's *anything* I can do."

"You can start by telling me your name and letting me take your cloak. I do hope you intend to stay awhile. I like to be acquainted with Draco's friends." Lucius seemed to be in charming mode, which made things easier on both of them.

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"I'm Sara Frances, Sir." She smiled, using her middle name, and removed the garment, laying it over his arm. "Thank you so much." She had withdrawn the wand and now held it in her hand, transfigured to appear unbroken. "Oh no. Wherever will I put this!" Sara rolled her eyes, "I never think ahead. *No pockets*."

Now Lucius did look her up and down, his smile turned to a very seductive half-grin, his eyes frosty and considering. "Draco must have found himself the prettiest girl at Hogwarts." He said, "This explains much of his behavior of late." Her confidence sank as he stepped closer and took the wand from her hand. Her nerves flared up again. "Your summer cloak is too light for October, my dear." Lucius put an arm around her shoulders and was leading her out of the room. "If you would, allow me to show you to the fire."

Sara felt panic trying to loom up inside her and forced it down. Harry was here, she reminded herself, Harry wouldn't let anything happen to her. All she had to do was go with the flow and hold Lucius' attention.

She was led to a leather sofa in a severely decorated parlor, lot's of dark colors, heavy winter drapes, terrifying works of art and horrible gargoyles carved just under the mantle. The fire itself did little to warm the place, the amber glow was lost in darkness. He sat her on the sofa and talked as he set about

pouring her a glass of wine.

"Please," she said, "tell me about Draco. He doesn't talk much about himself."

Handing her the glass, he joined her before the fire. She thought he was nearly beautiful with his long white hair aglow, standing out against the black of his clothes. Certainly the most interesting thing in the room.

"I'd rather talk about *you*, Miss Francis." He inched a little closer, "Are you also in Slytherin house?"

"I wish!" She said with false but convincing frustration, "No, Mr. Malfoy, I got stuck in Ravenclaw. Draco said it's because I'm more loyal than ruthless." she chuckled, "He's probably right. I don't feel ruthless very often."

"I don't suppose you would." He agreed.

Lucius was staring at her and the look in his eyes made her heart race. She was sure he was going to attack her and wished she'd worn a turtleneck.

"Tell me my dear, are you still cold? You're shaking." His arm went around her shoulders, pulling her against his side and he trailed a finger lazily along her skin. She was revolted to find herself attracted to Lucius Malfoy. He was dangerous and intoxicating, a refined and matured version of Draco, but twice as evil. Sara reminded herself that this man beside her, no matter how good-looking, would see Harry dead in a heartbeat.

"I'm warming up quite nicely, now, thank you." She sipped her wine, "I'm sorry, sir, but I'd really like to see Draco. I had this feeling that he needed me. He was very upset, which I'm sure you understand." her hand found and gently patted his arm again, "If I could see him for just a few minutes..."

"*Draco.*" he mused, "My dear Sara, a beautiful young lady like yourself has no need of a boy such as my son." He turned her chin up to look at him.

She was so close to him now, his arm holding her tight in place, his cold eyes only a few inches from hers. "I have a different view of the matter, Mr. Malfoy."

"Please, call me Lucius. Surely let's not be so formal." his voice was sleek like velvet and twice as appealing.

"Lucius, then." She gave him a doe-like smile, "Perhaps I see qualities in Draco he has not yet revealed to you. I think he has a lot of potential."

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"*A lot of potential.* Precisely what I thought when you showed up on my doorstep." his hand anchored in her hair, close to the root at the back of her head, practically immobilizing her. "The thing about potential is finding out how it's best spent."

Instantly she was on her back and he was over her, kissing her neck, moving closer. Having never kissed anyone except Harry, she was insanely curious, but turned her face away from his advance.

God, she thought, It runs in the family!

"No need to be shy." he said, his lips moving like a butterfly across her skin, down her neck, a bold hand running freely over her body.

Sara pushed him hard away and got quickly to her feet. She quelled her anger and did her best to quiet the unwelcome desire his attempts produced in her. She was scared for a moment, really scared, until she remembered her Harry, somewhere in the house under the cloak, looking for the room that held the trap door. He would know if she needed him. He always did.

Lucius was standing now and advancing on her, a devilish smile softening his features. Sara found she could not tear her eyes from his and had backed into the wall next to the fireplace. He was so confident, so nonchalant as he pursued her. Harry, she thought, hurry up!

"That's okay," he whispered, trapping her against the stone, "I don't mind a chase." He held her wrists, kissing her ear as he spoke, "My dear girl, you're trembling."

"Please." She whispered, a single tear coursing down her face, "You're frightening me." She was feeling woozy, as if she'd been drugged and realized he hadn't poured himself a glass of wine. The panic she'd held off so long leapt up to encompass her and it was all she could do to stay on her feet, her knees threatening to give out.

"Does it look like I'm trying to hurt you?"

"No, it's just that...I've never..." The moment it was out she knew it was the wrong thing to say.

The smile that bloomed on his face was nothing Sara had seen yet. Her heart was pounding in her ears, her whole body shook with the fear of him.

"How very interesting." he smiled softly, "I do believe this is my lucky day." He bent to kiss her again, but was interrupted.

"*Get your hands off her!*" A voice yelled from the doorway, it was Draco, and it was about time. He held his wand out before him, he was a mess of bruises on one side of his head and dried blood caked his hair, as if he'd been kicked, or slammed against a wall. His clothes were torn and dirty. There was murder in his eyes.

"Malfoy!" Sara said, relieved, and breaking Lucius' grip was easy as she was no longer the focus of his attention. As the younger Malfoy came toward her she stumbled into a run, tears flooding her face at the sight of rescue. He hugged her one-armed as she softly cried into his shoulder, his wand still pointed at his father.

"How dare you touch her?!" Draco seethed.

"Malfoy," Sara whispered in Draco's ear, "We have to walk away."

Draco was shaking with rage, his aura disturbing, as was the energy that flowed from him. His hand was steady, as if it had a mind of its own, his cold blue eyes unwavering. Despite his cool exterior,

Sara felt he was dangerous, at least to his father, and once again the image of him walking the fine edge of control came to mind. "Draco," she turned his chin to look at her, "*Not today.*"

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His wand somehow missing, Lucius found Sara's wand on the coffee table and smiled as he pointed it at his son. "Draco, you do have excellent choice in women, but then I guess that's to be expected. However, I think I'll be taking this one off your hands. After all, you dare to point your wand at me in her defense." Lucius hurled a strong curse at Draco and Sara, only Ron's old wand backfired, as they knew it would. In reflex, Sara threw out her hand, hitting him with a standard dueling blast. He stumbled backward and sat down hard, coming to rest against the side of the sofa. He was alert, they could tell, but unable to move and an invisible boot kicked him hard in the face. The welt swelled and turned crimson and purple before their eyes. Something splattered his cheek and dripped down over his lip and Harry, still unseen under the cloak, smiled with a sense of accomplishment. He had finally succeeded in spitting on Lucius Malfoy.

"Come on!" Draco grabbed Sara's hand, but she pulled away and went to Lucius. She summoned a beautiful crystal flask and took Ron's wand, returned to its original state, handing it to Draco, who was by her side.

"You didn't drink any of that, did you?"

"Stupidly, yes." She sighed and poured a good lot of it into Lucius' mouth. "It was nice meeting you, Mr. Malfoy." She said and let Draco pull her to her feet. She stumbled out of the room, his arm holding her up. She could hear Harry's footsteps and the rustle of the cloak just behind her and wished she could duck under it with him. Draco was comforting enough, but she desperately needed to be close to Harry. Her long ordeal with Malfoy's father had left her feeling vulnerable and only Harry made her feel truly safe.

Servants were everywhere it seemed, house elves and goblins going about their business, obviously accustomed to seeing a Malfoy leading a girl who seemed to have lost her footing. Harry stayed close behind them, especially when they passed someone in the hall, and Sara had felt his hand intermittently, touching her briefly on the shoulder.

Draco's shiny silver broom lay propped against the wall by the front door and as they finally stood together on the front step, Harry produced Sara's and his own from under the cloak, then grabbed her and hugged her fiercely. Draco rolled his eyes and turned his back.

"Where's Mrs. Malfoy?" Sara whispered, pulling back to look at him, her breath visible in the cold night air. She realized that she'd left her cloak inside and shivered.

Harry threw his around her shoulders and mounted his broom. He looked at Malfoy, not sure how to answer.

"She's dead." Draco said, his eyes downcast. He brought his leg around the Lightning Mach 1.

Harry's voice was hushed as his eyes turned from Draco to Sara. "He was locked in with her."

"Shut-up, Potter." Draco said with little enthusiasm. "Let's just go." He kicked off and the others followed, Harry swooping down to scoop up his backpack.

* * *

They landed a few miles away, safe in the middle of an unenchanted forest, where Harry's bag lay open on the ground again. He gave Malfoy the sweater and the extra gloves he'd packed for him. Took back his own cloak and gave Sara the heavy one she'd stowed earlier.

"Malfoy," Sara asked from where she lay on the ground, "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know." he sighed, considering, "What *can* I do? Turn him in? He scares the hell out of the Ministry. Nothing would come of it."

"You've got to make sure that doesn't happen." Harry added, "They can only make it disappear if it's kept quiet."

For the first time, Draco smiled. The old Draco, the sinister and cunning creep everybody loved to hate, was back in their presence. "*Of course.* Right you are, Potter."

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Harry smiled and slid the backpack under his cloak and over his shoulders, then drew up his hood.

"We'd better go. It's late and you've got some letters to write."

"Yes," Sara added, a grimace on her face, "and I've got to take a shower. Malfoy, you're father's disgusting! I can still feel his slimy hands all over me."

"Sorry about that." Draco grinned. "I think he liked you."

"Can you stand?" Harry asked and knelt beside her, sitting her up.

"Yes, if you help me."

Moments later they were in the air again, flying swiftly toward Hogwarts. Harry flew beside Sara, one arm around her waist, holding her steady, the other keeping a tight grip on his broom. She leaned against him, weak and sleepy, her head against his shoulder, watching as the dark towns passed silently below them.

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12. Finnegan's Swill

"Sara, just try to rest. Malfoy went to get Snape." Harry said as he brushed stray wisps of hair from her brow as she lay in her bed, weak and disoriented.

"I'm so sorry, Harry." She sniffled, "I really didn't know what I was getting myself into. He was intimidating, like you said, but he has the most disarming kind of charm. I never thought he would be so persistent."

"It's over now."

"I feel like I've done something wrong and you should be angry with me."

"We only did what we had to do. Don't think about it." he kissed her forehead, "I'm angry with Lucius Malfoy, not you, Sara. You were very brave tonight and I'm proud. I know how hard it must have been for you."

The memory came into focus in her woozy, fuzzy mind and she bit her lip. She'd found Lucius exciting. His power over her, his beautiful white hair, the *danger* of him and especially his cold eyes, always considering the possibilities. She remembered the sensation that had run through her and the way her heart had raced when she'd been pinned to the sofa beneath him, his lips brushing her skin and his strong hand wandering over her clothing. The thought was sickening. How could she have possibly enjoyed the thrill of being manhandled by a Deatheater who just had his wife executed and was mentally torturing his son? The encounter was only a diversion, she hadn't meant to feel *anything* and what transpired was about lust and fear, having absolutely nothing to do with love. Harry was about love. She was ashamed and couldn't bring herself to tell him.

"Harry," she wondered, her eyes falling closed, "Did it upset you?"

"Yes," his reply was dark and hushed, "I wanted to strangle him, Sara. I got there first. I heard what you told him, and I heard what he said to you. His lucky day, indeed. He's lucky he's still in one piece!" Harry took her hand and squeezed it. "And to be able to do nothing, just stand there and watch while Malfoy rescued you...I *hated* it."

"We did a good thing, though." She whispered, head spinning, "Imagine the horror he must have felt, being locked in a cell with his dead mother. We saved him from that, Harry. What we did tonight is a small price to pay."

"Then why do I get the feeling we haven't finished paying?"

"Potter!" Malfoy yelled through the door, "Let us in, this damned door won't open!"

"Have Snape open it." Harry yelled back.

The door appeared to work just fine for him, and Snape hurried into the room, followed by Draco, who was mildly annoyed. Snape sat on the edge of the bed and roused Sara, who was awake, but her eyes were growing distant. "What was she given?" He asked, "Whatever it is, it's strong."

"It was in the wine," she whispered. "Severus, I'm dizzy." Her hand crept across the covers to find his and held it.

"Quiet, my dear." Snape instructed, his voice gentle as if she were a small child, "Save your strength."

He smoothed her hair, a totally un-Snape-like gesture of affection, then turned to Malfoy, standing by the bed, arms folded. "Draco, what did Lucius give her?"

"I'm not sure," he said, but Snape caught the falter in his words.

"Don't make me get my truth serum. You're not on trial here."

Malfoy sighed, too used to keeping the family secrets. "It's a disarming potion, sir. *Vertiga Vulnertium*."

"That's what I figured." He sighed, "I knew it would be something *illegal*. Absolutely no residual taste when mixed with red wine. And also no good antidote. She'll have to sleep it off, I'm afraid."

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"How long?" Harry wondered.

Snape crossed the room and opened the large black trunk he'd given Sara for her birthday, loaded with every kind of potion imaginable, and withdrew something to make her sleep and dream peacefully.

"She'll be fine by morning." He scowled.

As soon as she'd taken it and drifted away, Snape suddenly pulled his wand on Harry, who's eyes widened in surprise.

"How dare you, Potter!" he nearly spat.

"Sir!" Harry got up off the bed and backed up a step.

"Do you have any idea how *stupid* that was? Lucius Malfoy is not one to take lightly, you blithering idiot, and we're lucky Draco got Sara out of there before he could do any...*permanent damage*!"

"It was the only way!" Harry defended, "Do you really think I liked the idea of leaving her in the hands of that...that, immoral *psycho*?"

"I should kill you for your stupidity!" Snape's hand trembled with rage, "How dare you be so careless, *reckless* actually, with a young girl's safety!? And must I remind you that this isn't Ginny Weasley we're talking about, it's *the Headmaster's niece*!"

"It wasn't Potter's idea." Draco stepped forward, "It was Sara's. And she would have gone with or without him. It really was the only way." Both Harry and Snape stared at him open-mouthed. Draco Malfoy defending Harry Potter. It was a moment for the history books. "Put your wand away, Professor."

Snape did so with a scowl. "You won't be happy, *Potter*, until you get someone killed."

"I understand how you feel, sir," Draco continued, "but personally? I'm rather glad he showed up." His eyes met Harry's briefly and conveyed his thanks with a slight smile.

Harry sighed. "Sara looked in the Orb," he lowered his gaze to her sleeping form and sank back down on the bed, "She said it would turn out ok." he took her limp hand in both of his. "She didn't know what we were up against."

"Really, let's go blowing things out of proportion, why don't we?" Draco threw his hands in the air, "Except for my father's enthusiasm, everything went exactly to plan! No setbacks, no hindrances. Sara kept him busy while you walked in and let me out of my cage. Weasley's wand back-fired, just as Sara planned, and the three of us walked out the front door! And Potter, my father *never even knew you were there*! He thinks Sara's *my* girlfriend and that I was defending her. He thinks I escaped! So, what

are you carrying on about?"

Harry leapt to his feet. "Your filthy, disgusting, *revolting* father put his hands on my girlfriend, *that's the problem!*"

"Enough!" Snape bellowed as Sara slept on, "Back to your dorms, both of you. I will stay with Sara tonight."

"No." Harry refused and crossed his arms in defiance, "I'm not leaving her."

"Fine, but I'm staying as well. A sleeping potion on top of *Vertiga Vulnertium* will require monitoring."

Snape sat on the sofa, the back of which faced the bed, and tossed warming charms onto the fire.

Draco left and Harry went to the bathroom to change into his pajamas. When he returned, Snape had his shoes off and was stretched out under a blanket. Harry carried a glass of water to his bedside table and set about putting out the candles. Finally, he lifted the sheets.

"You're *not* sleeping in that bed, Potter." Snape growled from the couch, "Not in *my* presence."

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"You know where the door is." He said and climbed in, stretching out beside Sara and wrapping his fingers around her hand. The exhaustion of their long flight and the emotional roller-coaster of seeing Lucius Malfoy about to kiss his Sara caught up to him. He recalled the scene vividly, remembered the way Lucius' eyes had run her up and down, smiling at her fear. Her wrists helplessly held to the wall at her sides as she pleaded with him, and of course his amusement at her confession of innocence. He could only hope the time would come for retribution. As for Draco, they were even. The favor had been returned.

* * *

"Well isn't this cute?" Snape sneered, "The two of you sleep holding hands. I think I'm going to throw up."

Harry and Sara opened their eyes and saw each other, their hands clasped on the pillow between them. He smiled and so did she.

"Morning, Harry."

"Good morning, Sara. Do you feel alright?" he pulled her hand closer and kissed it.

Snape rolled his eyes. "I'll ask the questions, Potter." He turned softer eyes to Sara and waited for her reply.

"I feel better. The vertigo is gone, but I still feel a little weak and my stomach is off. It feels almost like a hang-over."

"Precisely how I feel watching you two greet each other over the pillows." He threw the morning edition of The Daily Prophet onto the bed. "I believe you'll take an interest in today's paper." Harry picked it up and Snape went back to the potion chest, checking the etched labels of beautifully ornate vials and jars.

"Harry, look!" Sara smiled, "*Narssissa Malfoy Presumed Dead!*"

Harry read aloud. "*An early morning search of Malfoy manor did not recover the body of Lucius Malfoy's wife, Narssissa.*" He silently speed-read a few paragraphs. "According to this, Draco produced the letter his father sent him yesterday as evidence and the Ministry has opened an investigation. They're calling Narssissa a person missing under suspicious circumstances." He read the last line aloud, "*At this hour, Lucius Malfoy is being held for questioning, but has not been charged.*"

"Harry, this is great!" Sara exclaimed, "Malfoy wrote to the Daily Prophet! *Brilliant!*"

"Yes," Snape agreed as he handed her a cup of bright blue, bubbling, smoking, swirling potion, which she drank right down.

"You're brave," Harry mumbled.

Snape continued. "The honor of Head Boy certainly went to the *wrong* student this year."

Harry sat up and slammed the paper onto the coverlet. "Ron is *a hell of a lot smarter* than Draco Malfoy!"

"What's all this *yelling* about?" A tired voice came from the hall and into the room. Ron, in Harry's blue pajamas, tousled red hair winging out on the sides, stretched his arms and yawned. His eyes landed on Snape. "What the bloody hell are *you* doing here?"

"I should be asking you that, Weasley. And look, here's your little girlfriend, too."

Hermione stopped short behind Ron, wearing only his oxford and her socks. *At least*, Harry thought, *the shirt goes to her knees*. He felt bad for Hermione, having been caught by Snape in such a state of undress, but some little part of him found it amusing and he had to stifle a laugh. The look on Hermione's face was priceless.

"And would either one of you like to explain why it appears you have only just woken up? Let me guess, you decided to wander about the castle on a Sunday morning wearing ill-fitted pajamas and, *well,*" he narrowed his eyes at Hermione, "Miss Granger, is that Weasley's dress shirt?"

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Hermione made an unintelligible, odd little noise, turned on her heel, and bolted back down the hallway to the stairs.

Ron wrinkled his brow, "*Now look what you did!*"

"I asked you a question Weasley!"

Sara angrily threw back the covers and got out of bed. "I asked them to stay." She told Snape.

"Severus, you will stop harassing my friends! It never stops!"

"Allowing friends to visit and running a *flop-house* are two different things, Sara. I shall have to speak to the Headmaster about this."

"Fine," she said, "Maybe they're right about you anyway."

Snape just stared at her, obviously wounded by her words. She crossed her arms angrily and stood there in her white silk nightgown, looking back at him, her eyes hurt and betrayed.

Harry thought he could actually see Snape melting as Sara silently got her way and wasn't sure which was more effective, the doe-eyes and pretty face, or the lovely little slip of a nightgown. Then again, he decided, the total package was quite devastating. When Snape spoke again, his tone was a little defeated.

"Weasley, you will escort Miss Granger back to Gryffindor Tower and *do not* return until you are both properly dressed."

"Yes, Professor." Ron said and went back down the hall.

Snape turned back to Sara, "Perhaps going to the Headmaster on a first offense is not necessary, provided you assure me this will not happen again."

"Certainly, Severus." She smiled sweetly and Harry rolled his eyes as Snape smiled back, looking relieved and apologetic.

Hey Severus, Harry thought, *you just got played.*

"Let me know if you need any further assistance." Snape hurried out the door before she could even begin to answer.

As soon as she heard his footsteps on the stairs, Sara giggled. "He's a bit of a pushover."

"I know how he feels, the poor defenseless sap." Harry smiled, "Sara, you're *merciless*. Who could say no to you? Never in all these years have I seen Snape bend like that for anyone, even Dumbledore."

She met this comment with a wicked grin. "Get going, I'll meet you in the library. Don't forget your spell book this time."

"I won't," he grinned, "Are you sure you're alright now?"

"I feel quite good, actually. That potion is wonderful stuff, whatever it is."

Harry tucked his cloak into his backpack, along with all the other stuff he'd brought from his room. Ron's wand as well. "If we hurry, we can get an hour in at the library before breakfast. Will you be long?"

"No more than twenty minutes." She smiled.

"Good. See you then" He said and hurried out the door.

* * *

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As Sara emerged from the bathroom, showered, hair dried, brushed and styled, make-up in place and wearing a terrycloth robe, she noticed only five minutes had passed since Harry'd left. She headed for the kitchen to put on a large pot of tea to take along and share, then used a reducto charm on a service for four and watched it shrink as it leapt into a small basket. She added cream, sugar, lemon wedges, honey, and some raspberry scones, then went to her nightstand for her rings and Harry's amethyst bracelet, which she wore daily.

Movement, caught out of the corner of her eye, stopped her before the doors, one of which stood open and she watched as something small and dark came toward her, much like a bludger, but true and just as fast.

She stepped back, her hand going to the Fortificus Charm. It slowed coming over the porch and she could see it's wings as it veered and flew in through the door. She breathed a sigh of relief, smiling at her own foolish fear.

The bird was gorgeous, jet black, sleek and big. It dropped a letter, which she caught, and the messenger perched on the back of the sofa. Sara smiled and stroked it's head, and whispered a line from a well-remembered poem.

"Quote the Raven."

"Nevermore!" it squawked.

She was startled, then laughed and softly petted it's neck. "Of course that's what you'd say."

Glancing at the clock, she turned her attention to the letter. The envelope was of expensive, heavy paper and there was no return address. Of course, there never was unless it was sent by rented owl. Obviously, this raven belonged to someone.

Her heart nearly stopped when she saw it was addressed to *Miss Sara Francis, Ravenclaw House, Hogwarts*. "Oh God," she whispered and broke the Malfoy family seal with a trembling hand.

* * *

"Hi guys!" Sara set the basket on the table and started unpacking stuff for tea.

"You're late." Harry said and took a closer look at her, "Are you alright, Sara?"

Ron and Hermione looked up from their books. Sara averted her eyes and busied herself getting settled and passing out cups. "It's just the potion, it's made me a little edgy I think."

"Is something wrong?" Hermione wondered.

"Yeah," Ron added, "What's the potion for?"

"It's nothing," she smiled sweetly at her concerned friends, "I'm just a little off today. Severus thought it would help. Really, I'm fine." The empty spot, presumably saved for her, was next to Ron, looking across the table at Hermione and Harry. Ginny Weasley, whom Sara had met very few times, was on Harry's other side silently packing books into her bag. Clearly, she was leaving and Sara knew it was in response to her arrival. She thought Ron's sister was a lovely girl, long, full red hair and a very pretty face, but she always got the impression that Ginny hated her. It was obvious, especially with the way Ginny was tossing her belongings hurriedly into the bag, as if the place was on fire and getting

out of her chair simultaneously.

"Ginny!" Ron said crossly, "Aren't you going to say hello to Sara?"

Ginny looked up as she stood and met Sara's eyes and the look she gave was cold and angry. "Hello." She said and slung the bag on her shoulder.

"Why don't you stay for tea? There's plenty of time before breakfast." Sara offered.

"No." She said, "Sorry, but I've got things to do."

"Ginny," Harry turned in his chair, "you should stay. We hardly ever see you."

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Her eyes turned milder, nervous as she looked at him. "Sorry Harry, but I have to go. See you back in the common room. Bye Hermione. See ya Ron."

Sara was a hurt by Ginny's rudeness. And a little angered. "Goodbye Ginny."

"Oh," Ginny stiffened, "bye." She hurried away.

Sara watched her go. "I don't get your sister, Ron. What exactly is her problem with me?"

Sara spooned sugar into her tea as Ron and Hermione bent their heads to hide wide smiles and Harry was stone-faced, looking at Ron.

"Ok, then. Here's my list, Hermione." Sara said and handed Hermione a small list of potions and spells she wanted from the Restricted Section.

Hermione took it, avoiding Sara's eyes, still smiling. "It's nothing." She said, folding the slip of paper and adding it to Ron and Harry's, "That's just Ginny. It's got nothing to do with you personally."

"Could have fooled me." Sara sighed, "Okay, sugar for Ron." She slid the bowl toward him, "Honey and lemon wedges for the other side of the table, and cream for me and Ron."

Harry drizzled honey into his cup as Hermione speared a lemon wedge and Ron dumped sugar into his tea. Sara poured her cream, then slid it down the table and brought out the raspberry scones with a few napkins.

Hermione sipped her tea. "We have to start thinking about the binding spell. If we want to do it last day, then we'll need all the information well in advance. We'll screw it up if we don't know what we're doing!"

"Right," Ron agreed, "but we don't even know what Harry's book *does* yet! I for one think we should figure that out before we go making plans."

"True," Harry said, "We should wait and see, but we should at least come up with a few ideas. There's always the chance that my book won't work until we bind them together."

Hermione considered this and nodded, "What do you think, Sara?"

Sara stirred her tea, staring down into the cup, taking no notice to having been addressed.

"Earth to Sara!" Ron said and nudged her with his elbow.

"Huh?" She looked up, then around at their faces, all trained on her, puzzled.

Harry's brow creased with concern. "Maybe you should lay down for awhile."

"I'm sorry." Sara smiled, "I thought I forgot something and was trying to think of what it was. What did I miss?"

"The binding spell." Ron filled her in. "I think we should make it transport us to Majorca."

"I think it *should* conjure something. Like a gateway, but not to *Majorca*." Sara agreed.

"It could reveal a secret, like a hiding place," Hermione opined, "maybe even for our own secret potion or something cool like that."

"*That's it!*" Harry came to life, almost spilling his tea. "It *will* be a hiding place! That's *exactly* what it will be." He grabbed Hermione and kissed her cheek.

"Hermione caught on and her eyes widened with the brilliance of it. "I'll see what I can find." She quickly gathered up her quill and some note paper, "You're a *genius*, Harry." She kissed the top of his head as she stood, "I *love* you!"

Off she went and Harry turned back to Sara and Ron, who looked at him, puzzled.

"Here's what we're going to do." They all leaned in to hear his whisper.

"Good morning," Dumbledore interrupted.

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Harry smiled and, as always, took notice of the Headmaster's slight limp and the long walking stick he leaned on as he approached, both acquired in the days after Voldemort's attack. "Good Morning, Sir."

he smiled, "Please, have a seat. I think you should hear this, too."

* * *

Due to a lack of conniving, underhanded students this year, there were several empty beds and the Slytherin Prefects were given their own rooms. Draco wandered his, big enough for five, but a little too quaint for a Malfoy. He was dressed, but didn't know why. He had taken out some of his nicer clothes and got ready for the day long before dawn and was now restless. It had been two hours since he'd returned owls from the Ministry of Magic and The Daily Prophet, asking for more information and answers to troubling questions. Wizards from the Ministry would be arriving today to speak with him in person. He wrung his hands at the thought.

He was anxious over what he'd done and feared his father's vengeance, for surely this would never go unpunished. Even from Azkaban his father would find a way. He'd felt so heroic hanging around with Potter last night and with the way Sara made him want to prove himself worthy of her company, he'd plunged ahead and did the right thing. Only now he was afraid, unsure, and wished he could undo the whole mess and put it in the past where his mother now lived. He could lose his birthrights over this! He'd have to work and be ordinary. That is, if no one killed him first.

With a glance at his watch, Draco went up to breakfast, knowing his days were numbered.

* * *

As Harry scanned the Slytherin table, having not found Malfoy in his usual spot next to Crabbe, Sara lay a hand on his arm.

"I've got to go."

"But there's still fifteen minutes!"

"I know, but I'd rather not make him wait. Best to be early."

"Okay, then." Harry sighed, "I'll see you after Quidditch practice."

As Sara neared the Headmaster's office, who should she meet in the hall but The Devil Himself.

"My *dear* Miss Francis!" Lucius presented his sinister smile, "We meet again." He was dressed all in black, except for a tailored green vest under his cape, the clasp of which was a snake with a ruby eye, his sleek white hair flowing over his shoulders. Once again she found him beautiful, like Draco was. Strong, defined features, and cold blue-gray eyes.

"Stop writing to me!" She demanded in a loud whisper, "You're old enough to be my father!"

"And you're young enough to be my daughter," He backed her up against the wall and laid a palm flat on either side of her shoulders. "but you're not."

"I'm not interested, Mr. Malfoy." She said with a mingling of fear and loathing, "Leave me alone."

Lucius gave a soft laugh. "I hardly think so."

"You're a murderer."

"According to whom? My son? Unfortunately, Draco is going through a stage right now."

"I don't like you, Lucius. Stop sending me letters."

"See, I think you *do* like me." He raised her chin with the head of his cane, "*Don't you?*"

She looked him in the eye. "No. I said I don't."

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His slight smile was patronizing and Sara looked away, recalling the feeling that had invaded her on his parlor sofa. She felt it steal over her again, lessened but undeniable and as unwelcome as before. He lowered the cane and his gloved hand replaced it, brushing her face gently, his aggression diminished for the moment. He moved in closer and she closed her eyes, trying to force the desire that betrayed her into retreat.

He was only inches from her, his cheek brushing hers as he whispered in her ear. "Then why are you so afraid?" he kissed her hair, "You're shaking."

"You frighten me," she whispered, "Please, Lucius, leave me alone."

"*Get away from her!*" Draco bellowed from the entrance to Dumbledore's office, wand held out with intent to harm. "I swear, *Father*, touch her again and I'll kill you."

"Now now, Draco. No need for threats. Miss Francis and I were just talking, weren't we, dear?"

Sara said nothing and tried to inch along the wall away from him. Lucius grabbed her wrist, as Draco had once done at the Phantom. "*I asked you a question.*" he leveled his eyes at her. She was suddenly so intimidated that her free hand flew to the Fortificus Charm and she looked to Draco for help.

"*DUMBLEDORE!*" Draco bellowed, "*DUMBLEDORE! COME OUT!*"

The Headmaster was there before he'd finished speaking, almost completely hidden behind Draco.

"Mr. Malfoy! What is the prob-" His eyes fell on Lucius, who looked a little flustered, and Sara, backed up against the wall.

"*Lucius!*" Dumbledore angered and came forward to stand beside Draco. "Explain yourself!"

"No need to get excited, Albus." Lucius grinned, "I was simply saying hello to my son's girlfriend. No harm done."

"Draco?" Dumbledore indicated Sara, "Is this your girlfriend?"

"No, sir." He looked at his father, "I never said that. Now get away from her."

Sara wanted badly to be at the other end of the hall with Draco and her beloved Uncle Albus, but Lucius held her fast. "You're hurting my wrist." She said and he let her go as if he'd completely forgotten his grip on her arm. "*Leave me alone!*" She hissed and walked to the Headmaster, who's hand settled on her shoulder.

"Are you alright, Sara?" He wondered.

"Yes, Professor." She tried to smile. "Perhaps you'd like to see Mr. Malfoy to the door. Draco will wait with me until you return."

* * *

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Miss Francis?"

"My middle name." She grinned.

"My father's usually a little more perceptive. You must be a very convincing liar."

"Not exactly a lie. My name *is* Sara Francis, after all. But I don't understand! What is he doing here? I thought he was being held?"

"Just for questioning." Draco stood by the window as she leaned against the desk, "I knew they would let him go eventually. After all, my father practically owns half the Ministry. He was here to take me home."

"He *dared* show up here and ask for you? The audacity!"

Draco smiled, "Dumbledore told my father that if he'd shown up yesterday, he would have beat the new policy, which went into effect this morning."

Sara was curious. "Which is?"

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"Both parents must be present to take a child out of school during term." He laughed, "He told him to produce my mother."

Sara laughed, too. "You must have known he would protect you, Malfoy. Professor Dumbledore won't let anything happen to you. Don't worry. I know this must be scary, going up against your father, but you did the right thing. Your mother would be proud."

"Are you?" he realized this was the only opinion that mattered.

"Yes. Of course I am. What you did took a lot of courage, not usually a Slytherin trait." She smiled, "Perhaps you should try the sorting hat again."

At it's mention, the hat, high on a shelf, came to life and seemed to look down at them. "Ah, you again, Malfoy. Let me save you the trouble of disturbing me. You still belong in Slytherin." Just as quickly, it went back to being a hat on a shelf.

"Well," Sara grinned, "You can't win 'em all."

"I wouldn't feel right in a different house, anyway. I mean, what if it put me in Hufflepuff?"

Sara shook her head. "Never happen." She grinned and Draco laughed. Slowly the warm smile turned cold and slid off his face.

"Why do you love Potter?"

"What do you mean, *why*?" She stood, caught off guard by his abruptness. "How could I *not* love him?"

"But he's so...*dull*. Don't you ever get bored?"

"Harry Potter is dull? Are we talking about the same Harry Potter? Scar, glasses, Quidditch God?"

"*Oh please!*" he chortled, "Is that all it takes to make you weak in the knees? Or is this more feminine hero worship?"

"The hero thing is certainly a plus." she grinned, "But have you ever seen him in his uniform, windblown hair, just back from catching the snitch? I tell you, he's dead sexy."

"Gross!" he declared and went back to pacing, "I like my breakfast right where it is, thanks." he shook his head, grimacing. "Disgusting!"

Sara giggled, then considered the question more seriously. "Harry's the opposite of everything that *you* are. Although my view of you has changed."

"So I'm not dead sexy?"

"Maybe not *everything*," she smiled and blushed just a little.

He smiled, then looked embarrassed. "I'm really sorry about my father."

"At least I know where you get your manners." she leaned against the desk again, "I'm moved to forgive you after meeting your role model."

"Alright, then I'll think about forgiving you for never giving me a chance."

"Fair enough." she said and smiled sweetly, getting up off the desk and standing before him. She gingerly took his hand, went up on her toes, and kissed his cheek. He looked down at her, eyes smiling but confused. "Thank you for defending me." She said, squeezed his hand, then dropped it.

Faint footsteps warned that the Headmaster was returning and Sara retreated to her spot against the desk.

* * *

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By the time the first snow fell in mid-December, preparations for the Yule Ball were underway. As it was Sara's idea to hold several parties throughout the year, she was put in charge of the arrangements and there was a newly-formed committee at her aide, consisting of many volunteers from three of the four houses. Hermione divided her time between schoolwork, researching the binding spell, and screening music for the event, mostly on the weekend. Ron was always around when the team wasn't in practice and Harry lent a hand when he could, but for the most part, their time was taken up with Quidditch.

Draco ignored Harry completely and did his best to avoid Sara. His father was still a free man. The investigation was still open, but without a body, the Ministry told him there was little they could do. Lucius claimed that his wife had taken one trunk and a port key and left him. He'd also said that the letter he'd sent Draco was to keep him from worrying about his mother while he was away at school. Even the Daily Prophet was backing off, undoubtedly due to pay-offs and threats as well as declining interest in a story that had no new twists and no progress. In fact, his father was so convincing, that it was Draco's story that now seemed far-fetched.

He now belonged nowhere. He was ostracized by the Slytherin populace and glad of his private room. They glared at him, thinking him a traitor, as they and their parents were loyal sympathizers and supporters of Lucius Malfoy. They terrorized him, slipping their pet snakes into his bed, the Wronski Feint picture was tacked to his door at least twice a day, and even Crabbe and Goyle looked down on him. He was hated, a betrayer, and no-one's friend. He'd even used his prefect authority to take points from his own house.

He'd seen the notice up in the common room, not that a single person from his house would be interested. After little deliberation, he locked his room with at least a dozen spells and went to the meeting, held in the storage room across from Sara's door.

No one noticed him in the doorway at first, but then the room fell silent as one by one heads turned to stare open-mouthed. No one breathed for a long moment, then it was Finnegan, of course, drawing his wand.

"What the bloody hell do you want?"

Someone snickered in the back near the box of muggle music CDs, scattered around a table and some in piles marked yes, no, or maybe.

"I thought the party could use a touch of evil." Draco grinned, "I'm bored, you twit."

Sara came into view and he was surprised he hadn't noticed her. "Then come in, by all means!" She smiled, "We need all the help we can get."

"Are you *mad*?" Seamus demanded.

"Relax," Sara laid a hand on his arm, "we *do* need someone to design the Slytherin corner."

"True." Seamus conceded, narrowing his eyes at Malfoy. "But if he does *anything* I'll throw him over the stairs without a broom!"

She grinned with amusement, "Let's hope that isn't necessary." "Just don't set me on fire, Finny." He smiled wickedly, as if in challenge, then took pleasure in shining his prefect badge, just above the Slytherin coat-of-arms on his robe. Knowing if he said another word, Malfoy would take points from his house, Seamus went back to making centerpieces with Neville, Dean, and Susan Bones.

Draco joined her and she led him to a large round table where Ravenclaws, Gryffindors, and Hufflepuffs labored over miniature models of each corner of the Great Hall. One, he saw, was draped in regal crimson and gold banners that framed a giant crest. A proud golden lion paced the floor before it, sometimes rearing back and sounding a loud roar. Flanking the enormous lion on tall pedestals sat the Quidditch Cup and on the other, the House Cup. Across the banner Draco read the words "Happy Christmas from Gryffindor House". So this was to be his chore. Creating a living Christmas card from Slytherin to the rest of the school. He almost laughed with the absurdity of it.

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* * *

"Harry, I didn't think you were coming." Sara said from the sofa, a roaring blaze turning her blond hair to an aura of glowing amber.

"Quidditch practice ran over and then I had to help Neville with his DADA report. That new teacher the Ministry sent sure does like obscure topics. I forgot all about it and he cornered me in the common room." He smiled his apology, kicked off his shoes, and joined her.

"I have something to show you." She lifted a muggle mailer from the table and set about getting the contents.

"Mr. Sanders?"

"Yes." She grew excited as she handed him the snapshots, "They've finished the cottage and it's just perfect! I can't wait to see it."

"Wow!" he smiled as he leafed through the pictures, "It's great! I can't believe it's the same place!"

"I know," she agreed, "They certainly did a fine job restoring it. They replaced the roof, of course. All the stone has been repaired, new doors and windows, too. And I'm glad we went with white for the trim. There's already so much color around it in summer."

"This is the front room?" Harry studied the picture, "The fireplace looks brand-new! I like all the oak trim and the hard-wood floor is *really* nice." He flipped to the next, "What room is this?"

"That's the guest room. That's the den. The bathroom obviously." She instructed as he went from one to the next, "There's the master bedroom."

"Marble floors!" Harry was incredulous, "Marble's not free, you know!"

"Can you picture this room with anything else?" She challenged.

"It's perfect, I love it, but I thought we were going cheap on the cottage?"

"Well, in that case," she cringed, "You're really going to be upset when you see the patio."

"What patio?"

"The uhh, big tile one off the kitchen, right by the gazebo."

"Sara!"

"Well we needed *someplace* to put the barbecue!"

"What's wrong with flagstones? Or cement? And where'd this gazebo come from? *We never discussed a gazebo!*"

"I want a garden, Harry, a *nice* garden and I don't want to wait while you go to some ridiculous muggle job and make enough money to pay for half! If it has to be that way, you can have another side of the yard and pay for whatever the hell you want in it!"

"Fine!" He resigned, "But from now on we discuss things together. Let's *both* make the decisions on what to do with *our* house!"

"Agreed. And I'm sorry I went behind your back."

"You're forgiven. Now, do you think Dumbledore would lend us a bed and a dinette from storage?"

"I thought I would order a few things and have them delivered. Mr. Sanders has said he would be willing to go back and take delivery for us."

"What would we do without our friend Mr. Sanders? Who'd have known he'd be so indispensable?"

"I did." She smiled, "When I shook his hand."

"What did you see?" Harry wondered, she so rarely spoke of such things. In fact, the only time he could recall was when Malfoy was going to kill his father.

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"I knew he could be trusted. I saw myself older, in the future, speaking to him and shaking his hand again, thanking him for something. Muggle or not, ours was a fateful meeting."

"That I believe," he said and pulled her closer, flipping to another photo. "When did you have the driveway paved? And where the hell did that 2 car garage come from?"

"Oh, I forgot about that." she waved the question away as if it were unimportant. "I thought maybe we could take the train into London during the break. We could do some shopping and take a drive out."

"What about Christmas?"

"Well, we could fly back and spend it here, or we could stay at the house."

"It's up to you," he said, "But let's not buy too much until we can really take our time and look."

"Agreed. Just the basics. And whatever else we stumble across."

"Has the power been turned on?"

"Of course! The phone as well. There's one thing I won't abide in my house, though, and that's a TV. You can have one if you'd like, but I find they're a total waste of precious time."

"There was a time I would have given anything to be left alone at the Dursley's so I could watch whatever I wanted. It would never even cross my mind to turn it on now. Strangely, I don't really miss it," he kissed her head, "So we leave with the others Saturday morning? Did Dumbledore agree to this?"

"That's the problem. Severus has to come."

"He can't! Sara, we're going to live together in just six months! Is Snape moving in, too? When is this going to stop? I can't take another trip with Snape, I'll lose my mind!"

"We're just spending a few days at the Leaky Cauldron. At least that's what I told Unde Albus. As long as we're back by nightfall they'll never know."

"And how do you suppose we spend Christmas at the cottage?"

"I haven't figured that out yet."

"Then we should just plan on coming back here. We'll get what we need to move in and we'll all return together."

* * *

On the Friday before the Yule Ball, Sara called a late meeting of the decorating committee, an hour before lights out. The meeting was held on the roof of the tower, which Sara had encased in some sort of bubble to shield it from the snow and the cold. Flowers still grew, even though they were outside in winter, and it was warm, so that a sweater would suffice. Their heavy cloaks weren't necessary. It was like autumn on the roof.

Seamus placed Sara's cauldron on one of the smaller tables and Susan Bones from Hufflepuff filled it with water. Everyone stood back as he worked his magic, fearful of an explosion.

It wasn't Bacardi, but it no longer tasted like burned moonshine. In fact, he was setting things on fire less and less. As Harry watched Seamus taste his creation, cock an eyebrow and nod his approval. He remembered the first day of school, Sara charming Seamus' drink on the sly and saying he lacked confidence. With his newfound popularity as the "King of Swill", Harry thought Seamus finally had it. Hermione and Sara came onto the roof laden with great jugs of iced tea and pumpkin juice and Susan helped Seamus pour shots into everyone's cups.

Dean ladled himself some tea and took a taste. "Hey!" He exclaimed, "This is *spiced* rum!" He took another sip, "Finn! You really *are* the Swill Master!"

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Soon everyone was praising Seamus and going back for a refill. Harry finally got himself some and had to admit it was better than decent. It was smoother, it caused a hot glow going down instead of a trail of gasoline fire and it warmed his body with a tingle, like a potion. The spices mixed well with pumpkin juice and Harry found he liked it better than Sara's Riesling. He drank off his glass and went back for another. The shots, he saw, were getting bigger. "Do it again." Sara told Seamus. "See if it comes out the same."

A bowl of water was quickly set on the table and Seamus, his confidence in evidence, said his thing and flicked his wand.

Sara dipped the little glass in and brought up little more than a sip. Smelling it first, she quickly knocked it back and handed the shot glass to Susan, smiling.

Susan dipped in the bowl, too, and her face lit up. "Finn! You could almost drink that straight! It tastes good! And it's the same, if not better!"

Sara grinned. "Seamus," she said and walked him off toward an empty corner, "I think I have an idea."

The banging was becoming thunderous. With the music as loud as it was, it almost went unnoticed, but Ron finally went to the front door.

"You?!" Ron sneered, "I'm getting a little sick of you!"

Harry, swaying on his feet, fell in next to his friend and smiled wide when he saw who it was. "The evil quilting circle is down the hall to your left."

"Oh, shut-up, Potter. You, too, *Weasley*." Draco held up a folded sheet of paper, "I was invited. And not by either of you, so out of my way." He budged past them, almost knocking Harry over.

"Hey!" Ron grabbed Draco's arm, "Who the hell do you think you are? You'll come in when you're asked to! And what was all that *racket* about? Banging on the door like that!"

"I've been out here for twenty minutes! I did knock politely the first hundred times, for your information."

"Why didn't you just come in?" Ron asked, as if Malfoy was the most addle-brained person on Earth.

"Because, you idiot, this door is *always* locked!"

"Everyone else managed to walk in, Malfoy!" Ron mused, "You have to be smarter than the door."

"It's not locked," Harry laughed, slurring just a little, "It just won't open for *him*. I put a spell on it. Last year."

"Good thinking, Harry!" He and Ron laughed and Malfoy looked embarrassed.

"Oh, shove off." Draco muttered and stalked off to the roof. Everyone stopped to stare at him as he made his way to the cauldron, dipped in a cup, and found an isolated chair off by himself. Within minutes, he was forgotten.

* * *

Harry sat up in bed and finished off his hang-over potion. Sara stood in one of her silk nightgowns, bare shoulders draped in golden hair. Lately, Harry thought, even though things were good, everything seemed to be looking up and they were always in high spirits. Sara's black tress grew wider by the day. He wondered what was bothering her, knew she wouldn't talk about it, and figured it had to do with her parents and the approach of Christmas. Right now, though, she was excited and animate, glowing from the potion, and smiling down at him from beside the bed.

"So that's the plan? That's it? And just for that I stand to make all that money?" Harry wondered, reaching for his glasses.

"Yes, that's it, Harry. Seamus will produce the rum, you'll bottle it and fill orders. I'll send off a letter today for supplies. It's so easy! And Seamus said he'd split the profits, 50/50."

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"But I have to do all the work!"

"Not really. He'll be helping you. And you can make a stockpile of galleons for our house."

Finally, Harry smiled. "*Finnegan's Swill*, huh? Do you really think it'll sell?"

"Sell? Are you kidding? Good luck finding anything in the wizarding world that can rival what Seamus made last night!"

"It's settled, then. I'm in."

"Great! I'll make us some tea." She offered and headed toward the kitchen, but stopped dead in the middle of the floor, staring out at the roof.

"What is it, Sara?"

"It's *Malfoy*."

At the sound of his name, Draco turned from the railing and smiled at her.

"You've got to stop flying in like that, Malfoy, it's creepy!"

"Fly in? I hardly think so. Don't tell me you didn't know I was here?!"

"Uh, well, no I didn't."

"I did." Harry confessed, "I must have forgotten. Where did you go, anyway? I thought you smartened up and left." He draped a long velvet cape around Sara's shoulders, leaning close to her ear. "*He's staring at you.*"

She smiled and tied it below her neck.

"Passed out in a lounge chair if it's any of *your* business."

Sara went onto the roof, retrieving Malfoy and escorting him in. "Sit by the fire a minute, I'll get you some potion."

"I'll get the tea." Harry offered and headed for the kitchen, "I suppose you'll be staying?" He asked, stopping at the end of the sofa.

Draco reclined and pulled the throw over his legs. "What do *you* think? Oh, and just a little sugar with mine."

As he stalked off, Draco thought he heard Harry muttering something about poison.

When Harry returned, Sara had gone to change and there sat Malfoy, leafing through the pictures of their cottage.

"What are you doing?" Harry grabbed the pictures from his hands, "Do you always snoop around in other people's mail?"

"As often as possible. I had to do *something* to entertain myself!"

Sara emerged from the hall, nicely dressed in jeans and a sweater. "You saw the pictures?"

"Most of them, before Potter went ballistic. I like the patio."

"Do you?" She sat next to him on the couch like they were old friends, "They ordered the tile from Italy. I'm going to put in a garden all around it, with tons of roses and-"

"*SARA!*" Harry was livid, "Our *best friends* don't even know and here you are telling...*HIM!*"

"Potter," Malfoy turned, sincere. "It's a nice house. Small, but nice."

"Why thank you, Malfoy!" Harry slammed the pictures down on the coffee table and stormed out of the room, teacup in hand.

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"Harry!" Sara called after him. He ignored her and soon she heard the bathroom door slam shut and the shower start. She turned back to Malfoy. "Here, let me show you the *wine cellar*."

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13. Quote The Raven

"What's he doing?" Hermione asked as she stood next to Sara, surveying the just-decorated Great Hall.

"I don't know." She answered as they gazed at the corner across from theirs, the Slytherin corner, concealed by a large velvet curtain. "He wouldn't let anyone see his model. Severus was helping him earlier."

"I can only imagine." Hermione shook her head, "Letting Draco Malfoy design a corner was a bad idea."

"I'm sure it will be interesting. Besides, when the other Slytherins hate it, it has nothing to do with us. Come on, we still have to pack before we get ready."

"I'll meet you in the tower." Hermione said as they took the stairs to the third floor, "Ron and Harry should be done with practice soon. I'll bring them with me if you want."

"No, we'll meet them in the common room as planned. Come along when you're ready." Sara smiled when they came to the landing. "They'll do alright on their own."

"Sara, is everything ok?" Hermione studied her friend's face, her own worried, "You seem a little

distant lately. Is all good with Harry?"

"I'm fine, Hermione, thanks. Harry's wonderful as always."

"But your hair..."

"It's Christmas. This happened last Christmas, too. Only it was worse." She tried to smile again, "This year I have a new family."

Hermione hugged her. "I'm so sorry." She whispered, "If ever you need a friend, I'm here."

"Thanks. Right now, though I have a date with a bunch of Italian suitcases."

"See you later." Hermione smiled and took the corridor for Gryffindor. Sara went back down the stairs to the Great Hall and walked the expanse, now clear of tables, to the corner draped with heavy curtains. She could see movement and hear murmurs from within.

"Malfoy! Come out of there." She called.

He poked his head out, annoyed until he saw who it was. "Oh, Sara! I didn't know it was you." He stepped fully out, careful to rearrange the drapery so she couldn't see inside. "Wow! Everything's done! It looks nice, but we should have used more black."

"It's a Christmas party, not a funeral." She corrected, "What are you doing behind there? What's the big secret? Uhhh....Did I just hear *rattlesnakes*?"

Draco grinned wickedly, "Maybe."

"What are my chances?"

"None. No one's getting past those curtains. Bad enough I had to ask Snape for help with one of the spells. He liked it, though."

"I have to admit, I'm curious, but I guess I'll wait for the finished product."

"Was that all you came for? To use your feminine influence to get a sneak preview?"

"Actually, I wanted to talk to you. I can see that you're busy, so come by my tower when you're done."

"Will it be much longer do you think?"

"No, not long. Just the finishing touches. I'll be there soon."

"Good luck with your corner, then."

"Thanks." He watched her walk away, then slipped back behind the drapes.

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* * *

Sara sighed before the doors to the roof, watching the too familiar and almost welcome sight of the raven, growing near. It arrived at last, drawing up to hover as it dropped the letter directly into her hands. She turned her gaze back to it, wings a flurry of black satin and cold eyes that fixed on hers. A sense invaded her of another presence, of human intelligence and emotion. She threw out her hand and spoke a spell to turn an animagus back to into the wizard, only the raven remained. As she lowered her arm the bird came to rest on her shoulder and she sat on the edge of the bed, breaking the black seal she now knew well.

She stared stone-faced at the envelope, addressed for the first time to *Sara Lemke, The North-East Tower, Hogwarts*.

So he knew. But how? He even knew where she lived! It couldn't be Draco, she was certain of that. She'd point her finger at Severus before she'd believe Draco would tell his father about her. Horrible as Malfoy was, he had integrity, unlike his father, and was sincere.

The paper was thick and rich as always, the handwriting flawless and flowing. She trembled as she read it, Lucius knowing she was the Elemental was disquieting. Frightening, actually. And then there was the thought *does he know about Harry?* So far the raven only came when she was alone, as if it knew and it probably did. Sara had the feeling once again there was more to the raven than just feathers.

My Dearest Sara,

I hope my use of your surname causes you no distress. I still mean you no harm. What you are only adds mystery to intrigue, though I must inquire, why mislead me about your name and your relationship with my son? Why lie about your school house? Since your robes bear the crest of Gryffindor, I have to wonder about the identity of the invisible third party who, I assume, must have led Draco to you.

It is this person, the coward under the cloak, who dares assault me when I am defenseless that deserves my wrath. Not Draco, and certainly not you, Sara. I feel no anger or resentment toward you, only desire and fascination. I am captivated by you as I have mentioned again and again. There is something that goes beyond your considerable physical beauty, a sensuality, a subliminal quality that lures me.

Your refusals confound me. You fight what you know you want, to give in to your desires, but your unnecessary fear of me keeps you at a distance. This fear I do not understand. I wouldn't hurt you, Sara. I swear on my name. If you would only reconsider, I could put you at ease. Agree to see me.

Only then can we truly speak.

Yours,

L

Sara lowered the parchment to her lap and let her head fall into her hand. Tears of frustration, of helplessness, threatened and she wondered how long she could hold them off. Lucius knew it was Harry, he just couldn't prove it yet. He would know for sure if Harry stepped into the room at the wrong time. What was she to do? She read his words again, *you fight what you know you want, to give in to your desires...* How true that statement was. She detested him, but the attraction, the need to give in, was almost more than she could control sometimes. Especially when he wrote to her late into the night, as Harry slept and she stood on the roof to feel the wind against her skin. The raven perched on

the rail, she would read his words by moonlight “say the word and I’ll come to you in a moment’s time....”

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Flooded by guilt and shame, she stood and the raven flew unseen to a high perch in the shadows, looking down at her as she paced the floor, open letter in hand. She stopped, thunder rumbling in the distance. Her breath hitched and the tears came all at once and silently as a freak blizzard suddenly raged outside.

“Sara!” Draco appeared through the open doorway, coming partly into the room, “What is it?” she turned away and he rushed to her side, feeling unsure and uncomfortable, wanting to hug her, but knowing he shouldn’t. He put a hand on her shoulder and saw what she was holding. He took the all too familiar Malfoy family stationary and read his father’s words, growing more distraught with each passing moment. Finally, he put it back in her hand, her head lowered, eyes hidden. His voice was little more than a nervous whisper. “He knows *everything*. He knows it’s Harry.”

“I know.” she struggled to control her choked voice, “It’s not that.”

“Yes, I read the rest as well.” he grew angry, “The *nerve* of him, presuming to know how you feel! It’s absurd to think you’d ever give in to the likes of him!”

“He’s right.” She admitted in a whisper, eyes lowering to hide behind the veil of her hair, “I *do* desire him.”

“What? Sara! What about Potter? I thought you loved him and he was your soul mate and all that?”

She faced him finally, tears glistening and the pain he saw in her eyes twisted something deep in his chest. Again he fought the urge to comfort her.

“I don’t understand it! I *do* love Harry! And I hate Lucius, he’s horrible!” She looked at her shoes again, “But there’s a part of me that awaits his letters. I don’t know why I feel this way, but I’m unable to deny it. God, Malfoy, what do I do?” Her hands covered her face and she cried into them, letting the misery she’d kept hidden for weeks, *months*, rise to encompass her. “Your *murderous* father has found his way into my thoughts, my dreams. I can’t stop thinking about him and I feel so guilty when I look at Harry. I know you don’t like him, but he’s so *good* to me, Malfoy, he loves me so much.”

“I know he does.” Draco sighed, “And damn my father! All he knows is to destroy what’s good and corrupt what’s decent.” He took her by the shoulders, “You *must* stop reading his letters. Send them back, unopened. Or burn them where the raven can see. You have to resist, Sara.”

“It’s hard to be strong.” She confessed, wiping her eyes to no avail, “All I feel is torn, shattered. Disloyal and ashamed.” Her breath caught as she swallowed a sob.

The knot in his chest twisted painfully and he pulled her to him, wrapped his arms around her and she clung to him, crying on his shoulder. He stroked her hair as he whispered. “You’ll get through this. I’ll help you.”

“Promise you won’t tell Harry.” she sniffled, shivering.

“I promise. As long as you give me your word you’ll accept nothing more from my father.”

“I won’t.”

“You know how he was able to describe your robe, don’t you?”

“He must be watching me, or someone else here is.” Her tears slowed and she calmed as he held her. Draco, the son of the man who tormented her. She pulled him closer, desperate to lose herself in the warmth of a safe haven.

He bent close to her ear and lowered his voice, “It’s the raven, he uses a gazing stone to see through it’s eyes. And he can hear you as well. Keep the doors closed. Draw the curtains. If he sees Harry he’ll use him to threaten you.”

“I feel so *stupid*, so helpless.”

“It will be alright.”

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She pulled away and tried to smile, the blizzard diminished to a few drifting flakes, squeezed his hand and dropped it. He held her eyes, and raised a hand to wipe the tears from her face. Hesitantly, he kissed her cheek.

“I got you into this, Sara. I’m sorry.”

“This isn’t your fault.” She said and went to the bed, folded the letter and carried it to the wall next to the nightstand. There she knelt and pulled a stone from the base of the wall. Draco watched as she added the letter to a shoebox containing dozens of identical envelopes as well as small parcels, still wrapped in brown paper, unopened. She replaced the box, then the stone.

“Drink?” She offered as she crossed to the sofa, lifting the stopper from a crystal decanter on a small table.

“Sure.” He said and came to stand beside her, taking the glass when she handed it to him. He sipped, she emptied hers with a single swallow and refilled it. “Hey,” he said, concerned, “take it easy. Sara, you’ll be *fine*, I promise.”

She looked to him, defeated. “Will I?”

“You truly love Potter?”

“Yes.”

“Then tell me, do you love my father?”

She seemed to consider this as she watched the liquor in her glass, swirling it and when she spoke her voice resonated vehemence. “*Never*.”

Harry stepped into the doorway, then fell back, unnoticed, when he saw Malfoy. He listened, having been drawn to her by the sudden storm which had ended Quidditch practice.

Malfoy's voice softened, became hushed, "Do you love *me*?" Her eyes rose to his, waiting and serious. "I don't know how I feel about you." She told him honestly, "I once despised you wholeheartedly, but there's a side of you that's different, *respectable*. A side that has earned my friendship. I care about you, Draco, but I will never love you. Not the way you want me to."

"I accept that." He smiled.

She lowered her eyes to her drink again. "You wouldn't want me anyway, Malfoy. My heart is flawed."

"Actually," he lifted her chin, his expression soft, caring, "that idiot Potter has no idea how lucky he really is."

Harry, mounted his broom and descended the tower without a sound, out of respect for her privacy. He found her few words to Malfoy reassuring, but there was one thing that he found troubling.

"I betray him every time I close my eyes."

"And just look at the way you suffer for it."

"You don't understand." She whispered, "I *want* him to write to me. I shouldn't, but I do."

"Curiosity, Sara. You're human, after all." His hand went to her shoulder again, "Let me tell you something about my father. *He lies*. He will hurt you. He's cruel, Sara, and he loves nothing."

"I know." She whispered as her eyes slid closed, holding back the tears that threatened. "And I don't care."

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"Yes you do." He hugged her again, awkwardly, lightly. "And you know it."

She lay her head on his shoulder and moved closer, wrapping her arms around his back. "I'm so confused." She whispered, "And afraid. I'm afraid of what I might have to do."

* * *

"Come on, we're missing it!" Hermione called from the sofa in Sara's bedroom, "Sara you look perfect."

A voice drifted out from the dressing room down the hall, "I hate these shoes!"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "They're *yours*!"

"They look stupid!"

"Then change them"

"I am."

Hermione heard Sara's heels clicking on the marble, which meant they could finally go. She stood up and smoothed her long white silk dress. She hurried to the mirror to give her pretty up-do one last check, making sure the rubies and emeralds Sara lent her were fixed in place. A moment later Sara joined her, admiring her own hair, swept up and entwined with little braids and strings of diamonds and Ron's birthday gift, the amethyst comb, was tucked into one side. Sara dusted her hair with glitter, then Hermione's, who smiled in delight at the effect.

"Thanks," she said, "I knew something was missing. Now let's go. Harry and Ron will be waiting."

Sara handed Hermione her white cape and pulled her own, crushed velvet to match her black silk dress, around her shoulders, fastening the diamond clasp. Hermione gathered their flasks of Finnegan's Swill, gave Sara hers and they tucked them into unseen pockets.

Sara made sure the door was locked before joining Hermione on the landing and together they descended the stairs.

"How's Seamus and Harry's business coming along?"

"Better than I expected!" Sara grinned, glad to have something easy to talk about, "Lots of wizard bars and liquor stores are ordering regularly. Because it's so good, they can charge more and they're making a bundle! The bottles are cheap and the labels we made here, so it's pretty much all profit. Harry *hates* bottling rum, but he won't let me help. It funny, he wears one of my scarves over his face because of the fumes."

"That's great!" Hermione grinned, "well, except for the fumes. But it must be better than putting in 14 hour days seven days a week like he thought he had to do."

"Agreed." Sara sighed, "I'll never forget when we saw him, Herms. He was more muscular, but way too thin. And the dark circles under his eyes. He looked exhausted and ill."

"He wasn't taking care of himself. Those people he lived with, they were probably starving him again."

"He wrote something once that made me think so." Sara said, "Don't worry, though. The Dursley's will get theirs in the end."

"What are you planning?"

Sara smiled slyly, "Not what you think. It may be so simple as inviting them over to our grand palace and delighting in making them feel inferior."

"If you and Harry get married, will you invite them to the wedding?"

"Most definitely. I would force them to come, but really it's up to Harry. We shouldn't worry about that right now, anyway. Why didn't we take a broom?" Sara stopped, nowhere near the bottom.

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Hermione turned back toward the room and held out her hands. "*Accio!*" Instantly two school broomsticks were at their disposal.

* * *

Harry and Ron were just coming up the hall when the girls exited the tower, obviously tired of waiting in the Gryffindor common room.

"You're late." Ron informed them, "But it's ok because you both look *great*."

"Thank you." Sara smiled as Hermione went to his side, "And you look pretty damn fine yourself, Weasley." Ron beamed at the compliment.

"And *Harry!*" Sara grinned wickedly, "I swear, you belong on the cover of *Witch Weekly*."

Hermione agreed, her arm around Ron, "Harry, green really is your color."

"Thanks." He blushed a little, "And white seems to be yours. Nice dress."

She regarded the simple, elegant gown she wore, "What, this old thing?"

Harry laughed as he adjusted his new emerald green dress cape, ordered by Sara for the party, which he wore over a white shirt and a vest of exquisite fabric which he loved, black with green design and gold detail (also chosen by Sara) with finely tailored black trousers. Ron was dressed similarly, only his vest was blue and Hermione had bought his cape. Black, with gold trim.

"Sara," Harry smiled, realizing he had neglected her until now, "You look...*fantastic*. I'd better not leave your side tonight, I think. Really, you look beautiful." He glanced at Hermione, "You both do."

Ron, never able to stay quiet for long, just had to ask. "Was there a sale on that dress or something?"

Sara put her hands on her hips. "A *sale!*? Ronald, you have a lot to learn about what *not* to say!"

Hermione looked up at him as well, "They aren't the *same dress!* Just the same *style!*"

"They aren't?" Ron looked confused.

Harry laughed at his friend, "Hermione, you need to straighten this boy out."

Ron's voice rose an octave, as it always did when he was embarrassed. "Well the whole damn thing will be over by the time we get there. Are we just going to stand around in the halls all night while a perfectly good party goes on without us?"

Harry took Sara's hand and walked alongside Hermione and Ron. Sara was unusually quiet. "Are you nervous, Sara?" He whispered.

"Yes." She sighed, "Like I've never been. What was I thinking, Harry?"

"You were thinking you should please your poor old uncle, who asks you to play *every* Friday. You'll be fine!" they were on the landing above the great hall and Harry stopped. Ron looked back when they didn't follow. "Go ahead," Harry told him, "We'll catch up."

He turned his full attention back to Sara.

"What if I make a fool of myself? Harry, *all those people!*"

"If you start to panic, just close your eyes and pretend you're alone. Or pretend you're singing only for me." he smiled warmly, reassuringly.

"I've got an idea." She said and pulled the flask from her cape, "I need to loosen up."

"Good call." he took out his own flask and pulled the stopper, "Just go easy, you know, we don't need you falling off the piano bench."

* * *

Dumbledore stood where the Head Table used to be, two steps above what now served as a dance floor where a thousand students mingled under hundreds of candles.

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Professor McGonagall called out in her high, cutting voice. "Quiet! Quiet, please! The Headmaster would like to say a few words, so if you'll all quiet down..."

Finally silence prevailed and Dumbledore smiled. "Welcome to our now annual Yule Ball. Before the festivities get underway, I wanted to wish each one of you a Happy Christmas."

He was interrupted by a loud chorus of *Happy Christmas, Professors* and smiled warmly in thanks before continuing. "You have only Miss Lemke to thank for this party as it was totally her idea. She, with the help of her committee, put together everything from the music to the punchbowls. Also, she will be performing for us later, which is a rare pleasure indeed."

Sara turned bright red and Harry squeezed her hand. Her uncle smiled down at her and motioned for her to join him. She stood rooted to the spot, thinking she might faint or be sick.

"Come here, Sara." he said, "I'm sure you have a person or two to thank."

Mortified, Sara made her way up the two steps to stand at his side, putting on her most convincing smile to hide her fear of addressing everyone at once. The few sips of liquor she'd drank helped, but obviously, she would be needing a little more if she was going to sing. The very thought terrified her beyond words and she struggled to maintain her composure.

Feeling dizzy as she looked over the hundreds of faces who's attention she held, her eyes fell on Seamus and finally, she smiled genuinely. She adored Seamus, and looked directly at him, blocking out all others.

"Tomorrow we all go home to our families, or remain here at school, so I thought we should have this one night to be together, even if it's only to admire each other's clothes."

This brought a hearty laugh from the floor. "A lot of work went into tonight, and a lot of thought by a bunch of people dedicated to making this evening special for all of us. After all, we spent *weeks* just picking the music! Any complaints see Hermione Granger or Seamus Finnegan." She grinned and scanned the smiling faces, "But you can blame that mischievous mistletoe on me." More laughter rang out as the little green plants zipped around the crowd, stopping to hover over unsuspecting boys and girls.

"Unfortunately, I can't name everyone who had a hand in, but I think they've done a wonderful job."

There was a burst of applause that tapered off into silence, waiting for her to go on. Her nervousness slipped away as their reception grew warmer and she began to relax.

"In each corner of the room you'll find what one of us so rightly called a 'living Christmas card' from each house to the rest of the school. Behind me you see "*Happy Holidays from Hufflepuff House*"

Designed and created by Jonathan Sheldon and Mary O'Reilly. Also, "Enjoy the Season from Ravensclaws" by Trent and Mindy Blakely. On the far end we have "Happy Christmas from Gryffindor House" by Dean Thomas and Patty Patil." She saw Draco standing beside his curtain, a smug smirk on his face and she smiled. "The other corner, however, holds a mystery. Well Malfoy? Are you going to show us or not?"

With a wave of his wand the draperies rolled up and disappeared, revealing something no one had expected. Snow fell whimsically onto three goblins, dressed in old English garb, top hats and all, singing verses of Jingle Bells. A scene straight out of a Dickens novel. Behind them was the Grim Reaper, sickle in hand (the pole of which was wrapped with a swirl of garland and topped with bells and tinsel) was wearing a long necklace of bright green holly. His free hand waved intermittently at onlookers. They were surrounded by comical smiling rattlesnakes in rows of seven, all in Santa hats, rattling out the tune as they bobbed up and down and side to side as if dancing. The song was slow and drawn out, and the hissing was hilarious. "Jingle bellssssssss, jingle bellssssssssss" under a green and silver banner that declared "Sseasons Greetings from Ssslytherin".

"Well," Draco yelled to her, "What do you think?"

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Sara laughed in delight, "It's wonderful!" She heard her Uncle Albus begin to applaud beside her and she clapped her hands as well. Suddenly the hall erupted with thunderous approval and Sara swore she could see Draco blushing, and gloating, from where she stood. Slytherins clapped half-heartedly, or not at all, and many of them sneered in his direction.

As all attention was on Draco, Sara took the opportunity to escape, almost running down the stairs to where Harry stood with a group of friends. The torches along the walls went out, leaving the hall in a warm amber glow. David, a muggle-born Ravenclaw, was running the stereo and soft music, made only for slow-dancing, filled the room.

Harry watched as little third years wandered onto the floor, then more and more couples joined them. Seamus and Susan, as well as Ron and Hermione walked into their midst and Sara was staring at him. "Oh, alright," he smiled. "But let's get farther in. I'm a little thirsty."

* * *

An hour into the party, Sara and Harry had retreated to a large round table in the back of the room, occupied by Ron, Hermione, Seamus, Susan, Neville, Mary from Ravenclaw (who everyone knew fancied Neville), Liam and Molly, Harry's teammates, and a very quiet Ginny Weasley. She was the only one not sipping from a flask of Finnegan's finest, and Ron forbid anyone to give her any. She kept a trace of a smile on her otherwise unexpressive face. She'd come alone, without a date, and Sara thought she looked depressed. In fact, she only seemed to brighten when Harry spoke to her directly. As the song ended and the dancing stopped Sara's face turned white. "Oh God, it's time." She said and met Harry's eyes.

"Hey!" Ron yelled, "What the bloody hell happened to the music?"

"Shut up, you git!" Seamus answered, "They're doing something to the piano!"

Harry smiled and touched her face. "You'll do fine, Sara. You're brilliant. Remember what I said. Now you'd better go." He kissed her, not drunk but intoxicated enough to put some feeling behind it with all their friends there.

"I hope I can do this, Harry," she rested her head against his.

"If you don't, I'll never speak to you again. Now get going. And put that flask in your pocket!" he grinned, "You'll be playing piano in detention!"

Sara stood, gave him a nervous smile, and turned to go. Ginny was gone. Sara thought she must have left only moments before, right about the time Harry kissed her. She was beginning to get a clearer picture of what Ginny's problem was as she made her way across the room.

"Where's Sara going?" Susan wondered.

"Come on, everyone." Harry jumped to his feet, "Sara's going to sing, and we should be a little closer to the piano."

Sara's piano was situated on the higher section of the hall, where she had stood earlier with her Uncle Albus, and she approached it on legs of rubber. Her heart pounded in her chest and the alcohol surged through her, making her dizzy. She was determined to do this, had decided weeks ago, and wouldn't allow herself to back out now, not in front of the other students, the teachers, or her beloved old uncle. She especially refused to play the coward in front of Harry, who's courage knew no bounds.

A raven, unseen in the darkness, flew high above and came to rest on a ledge near the ceiling, its eyes watching Sara.

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As she slid gracefully onto the seat, she decided to become like him, at least for this moment in time. Fearless. In control. She reached into a pocket and withdrew the Fortificus Charm, reaching under her hair to fasten it. She closed her eyes as her fingers held it, drew from it what she needed. Harry's unfaltering fearlessness, Draco's determination, and even a welcomed bit of his generally obnoxious self-confidence. Her fingers settled over the keys.

She'd chosen the song for its soft beauty and deep emotion, as well as its simplicity, requiring only a piano and a woman's voice. But the truth of it was she'd selected this one in particular because Harry loved it. They'd danced to it on the roof at her birthday party and he'd played it over and over the night of their argument because it reminded him of her.

There was a microphone directly before her, charmed to work without cords or amplifiers, and the sight of it unnerved her all over again. She could feel the eyes on her, and the silence threatened her

resolve. Unable to endure just sitting there, the object of everyone's attention, she played the first few chords- and botched it completely, her fingers stumbling over each other, even though she'd been playing this song for years, in her home in Manhattan, and it was always flawless.

"Sorry." She laughed unnaturally into the microphone, "I'm a little nervous." With a deep breath she pushed her shimmering black cape back over her delicate shoulders and began again, botched a note but kept on playing.

Harry watched from the floor, worried for her, his fingers crossed in his pants pockets. When her voice faltered he held his breath, but she kept singing, too quietly, so unsure of herself, like the night she'd played for them in the tower. Her eyes slid closed and Harry relaxed. *Go away, Sara.* He thought, *go someplace else.*

Her voice grew steadily stronger until it soared, flooded by emotion, and the beauty of it left him in awe of her. The way she overpowered everything, like his heart was on a string and she tugged it with a force of musical passion. He was moved, and the vision of her in the soft light, graceful, beautiful, almost surreal, brought a smile to his face.

The sweet and solemn notes she played echoed through the hall and her voice rose higher and higher, then dove deeper only to climb to a new crescendo. Harry was mesmerized by what he heard, enveloped by a sort of rapture found only in music. It was the way he felt when the ghost of her mother's voice surrounded him in the tower, lifted, transported to a higher, more integral state of mind. Only this was Sara, who had always held his fascination, and this was here and now, not some old worn out recording. And it wasn't only he who was so affected by her, it was every person in the room.

No one moved, no one seemed to breath. All eyes were on her, riveted, *captivated*. And when her sweet voice died away, when the soft chords of the piano faded, there was silence.

Sara opened her eyes and the fear she'd forgotten rushed in. Her hand trembled as it reached for the Fortificus Charm.

Suddenly, the room exploded with applause. She looked around nervously, unbelieving it was for her, that the thunder of hands was in appreciation of her botched playing and shaky voice. She stood, trying to smile and roar became an ovation. She was shocked, but pleased beyond words when she saw every Slytherin smiling and clapping along with the other houses. It was this that thrilled her the most. They hated her because she was Harry's girlfriend, and they didn't look happy to have enjoyed her performance, but there they were.

Her eyes fell on Harry, standing alongside the others in the forefront and smiling whole-heartedly up at her. The look in his eyes alone let her know she'd done well. He moved to the base of the two steps, holding out his hand, which she thankfully took. He kissed her cheek before leading her back to their little gang of friends. The applause tapered off as she rejoined the crowd and a few moments after that people stopped staring at her.

"What's wrong, Sara?" Harry asked, "You look a little pale."

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"I...I'll be back." She said and hurried back up the steps, across the head of the hall and nearly ran down the corridor. Harry stared after her, thinking something was wrong and wondering what to do, then he followed.

He rounded the corner just in time to catch a glimpse of her, running into the girl's bathroom. Harry caught up quickly, but stopped short at the door. He sighed and rested against the jamb, wishing he could go in and convince her that she'd been good, *really* good, actually, but he would let her be sick in private.

Finally, the door opened and Sara stepped out, looking pale, but as flawless as before, and she smiled when she saw Harry. "I'm okay now." She told him. "It was just nerves."

"You were *great*." He said, "Your voice, Sara, I swear it casts a spell."

She took his hand. "Thank you."

"So, I suppose you want to go lay down." He led her back down the hall.

"No way! I've still got *a lot* of booze to drink. Just as soon as I get something to eat. Come on, Harry, I'm starving." She quickened her pace and pulled him along the corridor to the Great Hall. The Head Table area, which was previously cleared for her performance, was positively swarming with students. The Head Table itself was pushed up along one wall and now served as the food table. Sara ate directly, she didn't get a napkin and pick a few things, she just wandered slowly down the length, grabbing a delicacy from this or that platter and it went straight to her mouth.

When she tired of eating, they moved down onto the floor, where the Hufflepuff table spanned the wall, holding huge punchbowls of spiced pumpkin juice, punch, cider, eggnog and butterbeer. When they stopped at the eggnog Harry ladled her a glass while she fished the flask out of her cape. She dumped a good amount of *Finnegan's Swill* into the thick yellowish liquid and added a dash of cinnamon. They lingered there while she drank it, watching people dance. The music was the typical club fare, like they played at The Phantom. Hard, thumping base-line, flowing rhythm, and spunky urban lyrics. Harry liked it alright, it wasn't his favorite, but it was excellent for dancing and the crowd was super-charged with energy.

Finally, a slow song came on. Sara set down her glass and Harry led her into the throng of swaying couples.

When the dance was over, Harry spotted Ron's flaming red head and moved in that general direction. Another slow song came on, but Sara could tell Harry was sick of dancing and wanted to hang out with their friends. They'd crossed about half the expanse when they were stopped short by Malfoy,

who appeared in their path.

The raven watched intently as Malfoy spoke and Harry looked furious, but eventually Potter stalked off and Sara took Draco's arm. Malfoy escorted Sara to a dark and remote part of the floor, far removed from Gryffindor eyes, and went gracefully into the rhythm, holding Sara like a pro.

"Where did you learn to dance?" She asked, pleasantly surprised, "I would have never guessed."

"My mother. She insisted I take lessons and I have since I was little. She always drilled me about how grace was an important part of any important man." He smiled in amusement, "She says it's hard to respect a clutz."

"She was right, Malfoy, and you're all the better for it." Sara smiled back, "Graceful you are."

"You're no clutz yourself."

"I *also* took lessons. Ballroom, ballet, tango, you name it. For all the same reasons, basically."

"Then we're two of a kind, aren't we?" He grinned.

She grinned back. "We're *not*, of that I'm quite sure."

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"So, you're going to hate me forever, then?"

Sara giggled, "Well Malfoy, I'm going to try." She thought he looked fantastic, but refused to tell him. He was dressed all in black, rich, expensive fabrics and catches of gold here and there. He'd been neglecting the barber for quite some time and his fine blond hair fell just to his shoulders. It had been jaw-length at start of term. Sara thought it looked great on him, lent to his elegance. Then she thought, if people were gemstones, Malfoy was a diamond, flecked with flaws and with a dangerously sharp edge.

"Are you feeling better?" He asked in reference to earlier.

"I guess. Thanks for listening to me." She said, "You just happened to walk in while I was reaching my breaking point."

"You asked me to come. I assumed that was why."

"Actually, I wanted to ask what your plans were for Christmas."

He smiled, thinking he would be totally and utterly forgotten on that day. He'd almost gotten used to the fact that he'd be spending it alone. No awesome and expensive gadgets, no fine new clothes for him *this* year. Just a cold morning in the Slytherin common room with his misery and loathsome selfpity.

"I thought I'd hang around the dungeons. Torture the rats or something."

"Will this be your first Christmas away from home?"

"Yes." He said quietly. "So, you and Potter going to help out in a local soup kitchen? Deliver turkeys to hungry wizards? Or do you plan to cut to the chase and save the world straight away?"

"Something a little less dramatic. We're taking the train in the morning and we're spending a few days in London. We'll be back Christmas eve, so I wanted to know if you cared to spend the night in my tower."

Draco looked surprised and gave no answer.

"There are tons of guest rooms and everyone else is staying, too. I thought we could have dinner and drinks, then do presents in the morning. What do you say, you in?"

"Absolutely." He grinned, then his smile faltered. "Wait, who does *everyone else* consist of?"

"Harry of course. Ron and Ginny are going to Hermione's. Seamus can't make up his mind, but last I knew he was staying. There's a little third year girl, an orphan from Hufflepuff who lives in a foster home. And Neville of course, since his Grandmother died last year. Hagrid's going to visit his girlfriend at Beauxbatons. Argus Filch, thank God, is staying with family. Severus and Uncle Albus won't be sleeping over, but I'm sure they'll be coming for dinner."

"You said *Uncle Albus*."

Sara looked horrified, realizing she had.

"And for a minute there, you lost your British accent."

She sighed, resigned. "Well, I might as well tell you. Voldemort knows I'm the Elemental now anyway. The charade is no longer necessary. I'm not Hermione's cousin. I'm from New York, but my parents grew up here. And yes, Albus Dumbledore is my great, great uncle. I don't have a wand because my parents, too afraid of Voldemort, wouldn't risk taking me into a wizard market. They taught me everything I know, which is a lot, and taught me how to do wandless magic from the time I was born. He killed them in October of last year."

"I'm sorry."

"You see, Malfoy, you're not the only miserable soul at Hogwarts."

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He smiled softly as he so rarely did, and at that moment Sara found him beautiful. It warmed his features and brought new life to his cold ice-blue eyes. She returned his smile as she looked up at him and a sprig of mistletoe abruptly stopped and hovered above their heads. For a moment she thought he was going to kiss her, but the song was over and he was gone, swallowed by the crowd, leaving her suddenly standing there alone.

"Well if *he* won't do it, *I will*." Seamus said and kissed her cheek. "What are you doing dancing with that creep anyway?"

"I don't think he's so bad."

"He's been acting weird all year, but trust me, *he's that bad*."

Sara laughed. "Come on, Finn. Let's find Harry and get another mixer."

* * *

Harry was on the other side of the room, dancing with Ginny Weasley.

"Eggnog?" Seamus asked as he left Sara's side.

"Yes." She said and turned to Harry, laying a hand on his arm. He turned to her and Ginny bit her lip when she felt his grip on her falling away.

Sara smiled brilliantly. "Hi Ginny."

Ginny said nothing, just glared silently at Sara, then turned on her heel and stalked off. Sara got the feeling Ginny was trying not to cry.

"Harry! What the *hell* was all that about?!"

"Behold, the girl I almost kissed." He sighed and settled into an uncomfortable smile.

"You almost kissed *Ron's little sister*?"

"I love Ginny, Sara. Just not in the way that warrants kissing. She's like a sister to me, just as the rest of Ron's family has become my own. It just didn't seem right."

"Little experimental kisses don't matter anyway. I kissed my neighbor once in New York, Zach his name was, but I don't count it because I was only ten."

Harry laughed. "Well if you're discounting stuff like that, I kissed Hermione once in our second year. It didn't last long and it was totally bazaar. We never got it in our heads to do it again."

"I can't even picture it, Harry, it's too weird." Sara laughed.

"I should go check on Ginny." Harry shrugged, "Make sure she's ok."

"I'll be here when you get back."

Seamus arrived with the mixers just as Harry slipped away. Sara took hers and excused herself. She drank it down when she reached the punchbowls on the other side of the hall and set down her glass.

She found Draco sitting in a chair at the end of the table and he looked up in surprise when she appeared before him, shimmering in silk and velvet.

"We're dressed the same." He observed, indicating their all-black clothes. "Great minds think alike."

"Come dance with me."

He just stared at her, thinking she must be joking. She smiled warmly and offered her hand. Smiling in return, he took it and let her help him up. She found a dark corner and laid her hand in his.

"Where's Potter?"

"He's talking to Ginny."

"And that doesn't bother you? She's only been in love with him since she was born."

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"It doesn't bother me because I trust Harry and I believe him. After all, he shows me the same respect."

"Yes, but he hates every minute of it."

Sara fished the flask out of her cape and offered it to Malfoy, who took several big swigs before handing it back without even a hint of a wince.

Sara laughed, sipping it. "He can dance *and* he's mastered lemon-face. There's more to you than meets the eye."

"I can't think of a more true statement."

Sara grinned, "Come on, Malfoy, let's take a walk. We can finish *this*." She touched her pocket.

The raven watched intently from its high perch as Draco led Sara out of the Great Hall and down a corridor. It waited until they turned a corner and then it followed.

They found themselves out in the cold winter night and stopped at a bench. Sara charmed away the snow and ice while Draco put warming spells on their capes. Sara pulled hers around her bare shoulders as she sat beside Malfoy, who was taking a drink of rum.

Draco held up the flask and gave it a shake, producing a minute splashing from inside, indicating it's emptiness. Sara pointed her finger at it. "*Replenish*."

The flask grew heavy in his hand and he looked mildly amazed. Even *he* didn't know that one.

"Impressive!"

"Thank you!" She took a sip of rum, "Now it's your turn. Impress me."

"I do believe that's impossible."

"Don't be silly. Come on, do a trick for me. Something cool."

Draco racked his brain. He knew lots of cool charms and spells, but none befitting of her audience.

Surely blowing up rats and his latest accomplishment, conjuring an evil tree that entwined a victim in its branches and ate them, would impress her. Finally, he spoke. "I don't know any."

Given the fact that she hadn't eaten much, the rum was making her drunk and giddy. She let her head fall against his shoulder.

"Why is everything so complicated, Malfoy?" She asked, her voice muggy from the drink, "How can a person be totally in love with someone, yet have feelings and desires for other people? It makes no sense to me." She took another sip and handed it back, "What does it mean?"

"It means that you're human." He told her and tipped the flask, thrilled that she was leaning against him, "It's normal, Sara. It happens to everyone. It doesn't mean *anything*. You just have to make choices."

"All of which have consequences. And they all come back to Harry. Whatever I do, it affects him. I hate being in control of what happens to Harry. Being in love is like being a parent in the way that you become responsible for the other person's state of mind. It's cumbersome at times." She held up a hand and studied her palm. Her vision was a little blurred, but she easily made out the worrisome ring where the line split in two and then rejoined, like a river around an island.

"I wouldn't know. I've never been in love before. I don't think it happens to Malfoys. Not often, anyway." He lifted the flask and took a long swallow.

"Maybe you should change your name, then."

"I wish I could, but 'Kevin Malfoy' just doesn't sound right."

Sara laughed out loud and her hand fell on his arm. "*Kevin Malfoy!*" she laughed, "You're too damn funny!" He offered her the flask. "God no, I can't drink another drop," she pushed it gently away, "you'd have to carry me back to my room!"

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"Sara?" he asked, sitting her up to look at him, as much as he hated parting her from his shoulder,

"Can I ask you something."

His face grew serious and her laughter subsided. "What do you want to know?"

"Pretend for a moment that Harry Potter was someone you had never met. Would you go out with me?"

I mean, would you be interested at least?"

"It's hard to imagine not knowing Harry, but I'll give it a try." She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them and smiled as she caught his winter eyes. "*Absolutely.*"

She could tell this was not the answer he'd expected, and when he said nothing, she continued. "I like you, Malfoy. There's something about you I find mysteriously attractive. And you're fine, like a diamond among ordinary glass. You're consistent but unpredictable. You're oozing confidence and grace. You're everything your father is, except hateful." She smiled ever so slightly, "I think you're beautiful."

He took a deep breath and whispered as a hand tangled in her hair. "Then give me this one memory."

Before she could think of what she was doing, she kissed him. He pulled her close, putting everything he had into the moment, knowing he would never be this close to her again, and she responded.

The raven stretched its ebony wings and flew off into the darkness, unseen, unheard.

* * *

"How do you know it isn't right, Harry? You've never even given me a chance! I've been waiting *forever* to change your mind, but in all that time you've never liked me, you don't now and I have a feeling you never will. Why would you, anyway? I can't even compare to *her!* She's so damn *perfect*. She makes me feel ugly and clumsy and awkward. She's the girl who *always* wins. The prima-donna. And I'm just the ugly duckling in the wake of a swan."

"You're *not* ugly, Ginny!" Harry insisted, "I think you're beautiful."

"What's beauty when it's second rate?"

"And who's second rate? There are no classifications of beauty, just different *perspectives*. Ginny, I love Sara, but I love you, too. You're like family to me. I don't see you as better or worse, just someone I care a great deal about. It's just...*different*."

"Yes, forever the little sister! I already have six brothers, Harry. And you *don't* love me. You're just saying that to save my feelings. Besides, you've been into Seamus' rum all night. You're half daft."

"Did I not risk my life to save you from the Chamber of Secrets?"

"Was there someone you *wouldn't* have saved?"

"Look, Gin, I *do* love you." He swept a wisp of her gorgeous red hair from her face as her hurt and tormented eyes studied him.

He thought of all the years he'd known her, and how important she was to him. He'd wanted to kiss her that night at the Burrow, the summer before 6th year, and knew how crushed she'd been when he'd backed away. It really *had* felt strange, but the truth of it was, he was terrified. He felt drawn to her now, alone in the darkness, confronted with all the pain he'd ever caused her. Anguish and frustration darkened her face, her eyes swam with tears. That he made her feel this way agonized him and he wanted desperately to reassure her. He placed his hands on her shoulders. "I would never lie to you."

"So I'm to feel this way forever?" she whispered, surrendering to her suffering, "Rejected, my only memory a kiss denied?"

"Denied out of love and respect." He said and his hand gently brushed her face.

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She stepped closer, close enough to hear him breath, and met his eyes. He was startled by the emotion he saw in her, even in the dimness of the moonlit library. She really *was* beautiful, he thought. He'd always loved her long ginger hair and her fair complexion. She looked so pretty in her champagne satin party dress, her cape askew on her shoulders. She looked so sad and vulnerable that he pulled her closer, meaning to hug her, but he kissed her instead. He kissed her like he never would again, and a thought echoed through his mind.

....Sara....

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14. Nevermore

Sara groaned as she prepared to open her eyes. It had been months and months since she'd had a hangover like *this* one. Her whole body ached and she was a little queasy. She felt sick almost, her head heavy and sore. Immediately she scolded herself for drinking so much on a nearly empty stomach.

"Harry?" she whispered and tried to throw a blind arm around him, only it dropped like lead to the neatly made other side of the bed. "*HARRY?*" she called and opened her eyes, thinking he must have woken early and was fixing tea or something. But there was no answer. She didn't hear the shower running and his clothes weren't laid over the back of the chair. She glanced around for a note, but saw none. Had he ever made up his side before? He had been leaving while she slept for nearly a year now and she couldn't remember him doing it even once. And he didn't leave at dawn on the weekends, ever. He always stayed and they had tea together. If he had an early Quidditch practice he always left

her a note and a glass of ice water on the bedside table. It was Saturday and she knew there was no practice today.

"The train!" She said and sat up, moaning as her stomach leapt up in protest of such sudden movement. She heard a yawn from the sofa and turned her eyes to the back of it and smiled. He must have fallen asleep before the fire.

She found she remembered very little of the night. She couldn't recall even seeing Harry after his dance with Ginny. Nor could she recall the later part of the evening at all, or returning to the tower. Had she come with Harry? When had she put on a nightgown? With effort, she held out a hand and said "*Accio hangover potion.*" In a moment she was holding it. She didn't bother with a glass, just lifted the stopper and took a big gulp, finding relief and renewed vigor in the warm glow instantly.

"There, that's better." She said, "Harry! Hey, what are you doing?"

"If you call me Potter again I'll kill you." Mumbled a sleep-laced voice from the couch.

"Severus!" She said in surprise, "What are you doing here? Where's Harry?"

"They found your *idiot boyfriend* passed out in the library. The Headmaster took him to the hospital wing, but I assure you he's fine. And as for what I'm doing here," he stood, stretched, and came to sit in Harry's chair beside the bed, "I was your sentry."

"How did I get here?"

"Draco brought you. He carried you all the way up those steps."

"*Malfoy!*" She gasped, the memory coming to her clear and complete. Her hand went for her neck, but found the charm wasn't there. "Oh, God!" She said, "*Malfoy!*"

"It *pleases* me to see you spending time with Draco." Snape smiled, "You look so good together. You know Sara, the right girl could change things for him."

"Severus, are you mad?"

Snape said nothing, only smiled in a knowing way and it disarmed her.

"What happened? What do you know?"

"Only that you danced with him all night. *After* you returned from outside."

"I danced with Malfoy *all night*? Oh no. *Harry!*"

"I don't think he noticed. He disappeared with Ginny Weasley and I never saw him again."

"Well it's not like you were *watching* for him or anything, he could have slipped by without your noticing."

"Actually, I *was* watching for him. I encourage your... *friendship* with Draco and wanted to make sure you were undisturbed."

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"Severus! I am not interested in Draco Malfoy!"

"I didn't watch for Potter *right away*, Sara. I came looking for you after Draco led you out. I needed to make sure he was behaving himself after the way he's treated you in the past."

"Earlier you said we were outside. *How* did you know??" She began to tremble, nervous.

"Let's just say that I found you and leave it at that." He grinned.

Sara threw back the covers, leapt to her feet, and paced the floor in her nightgown. She stopped dead and looked at him. "*Who changed my clothes?*"

"Madam Pomfrey."

"Well *that's* a relief at least." She dropped heavily onto the side of the bed across from Snape. "Does anyone else know?"

"I took great care to make sure they didn't. Believe me, I would love to see the look on Potter's face when he found out, but I know that's not what you want. Unless Mr. Malfoy decides to write the Daily Prophet again, it's our little secret. However, you should know Sara, that secrets like this are never best *kept*."

"Thank you." She sighed, "For the discretion *and* the advice."

"Would you mind a little more?"

"Of course not."

"Decide what you want to do. Draco has had enough hardship these past months. Don't string him along. A choice should come sooner than later."

"I swear, I don't even have feelings like that for him! The more we drank, the more I seemed to develop them. There's just something about him, I don't really know what it is, but it's endearing, that's all. We're just friends!" she argued, "Besides, he *is* rather good looking and it doesn't exactly count against him. It makes up for his lack of charm. In my altered state I was lured in by it."

"However it happened, I'm glad of it. A girl your age should not commit herself to one person alone. Detach yourself from Potter for awhile. See other people."

"You really *are* mad!"

"*I give up.* Why does it have to be *Harry Potter*? Of all the young men in the world, Sara, you *had* to chose *him*! Draco Malfoy is smitten with you. It's blatantly obvious to me and I've seen changes in him because of it. I think you're wrong to simply discard him over a freak infatuation."

She stood, her anger sparked, but she held it in check. "I have to finish packing. Would you be a dear and make us some tea?"

"Certainly." He sighed and gave her a tired smile, knowing he'd pushed the subject too far. "Just promise you'll *consider* it."

"I will, if you promise me you'll never mention this again."

He bowed his head and she vanished down the hall.

* * *

Harry opened his eyes to an unfamiliar ceiling. He'd seen it before and knew he was still at school, but it wasn't Sara's ceiling, nor his own. His whole body hurt and his eyes ached. His stomach was sour and he moaned, miserable, and let his eyes fall shut again.

"Good morning, Harry."

He knew the voice as well as his own and his eyes shot open again with surprise.

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"Professor Dumbledore!" He said, his voice harsh and raspy, like that of a heavy smoker. He turned his head toward the bedside chair and recognized his surroundings at once. He grew alarmed and tried to sit up. "Why am I in the hospital wing? Where's Sara? What happened? Is Sara ok?"

"Well, what to answer first?" Dumbledore smiled, "*Most important* first, I guess. Sara is fine, at least as fine as you are. She's in her own rooms, but don't worry, Harry, Severus watched over her during the night. As for what happened and why you're here, the answers are one in the same. You were found in a state of unconsciousness, due no doubt to your excesses, and were brought here under my direction as a precaution."

"I was in the library." He recalled, "I must have uh, fallen asleep. I'm very sorry, sir."

"Sorry you should be! You certainly gave Miss Weasley a good scare, and me as well."

"Ginny!" He said and collapsed onto the pillows, "*Oh no.*"

"This sort of behavior I expect from Sara, but not you, Harry."

"Professor, I'm *seventeen*."

Dumbledore smiled as if he couldn't help himself, then all his seriousness returned. He wasn't angry, that much was clear, but he wasn't exactly pleased, either. "Ginny Weasley said she'd spoken to you earlier and that she'd left you there in the library. Awhile later she returned to check on you and found you as I did, unresponsive. Tell me, Harry, was there a problem? Something that upset you?"

Harry hesitated, remembering his 'conversation' with Ginny. "No, sir. Nothing to be concerned about."

"Is everything alright with Sara? I feel I have to ask, for she was in the same condition according to Severus."

"Everything's fine." He lied, feeling his world was about to come crashing down. He'd kissed Ginny last night in the library. He'd *wanted* to and he was sure Sara would know the next time she touched his hand or looked in the Orb. She would leave him then, he was sure of it.

"Harry, there are things you can tell me. If something's troubling you I would be glad to listen, and help if possible. Don't think that because Sara is my niece I am no longer trustworthy. Anything you confide to me would be kept in the strictest confidence."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate your offer, it's just that some things are better left unsaid." He felt sure telling Dumbledore about kissing Ginny in the library would only add to his state of distress. As it was, he already couldn't meet his eyes.

"You're wrong, Harry. I wouldn't judge you. As young girls and boys transcend into adulthood, they do things that make no clear sense, even to themselves, and often go against what they most want. It's a part of life, a weakness not of character, but of curiosity."

Harry sighed, "You *know* what troubles me, that much is clear." He sat up again and focused on the old man's forehead. "You once warned me. I didn't listen. I'm sorry I disappointed you. I've disappointed myself, as well. Now if you don't mind, sir, I'd like to be alone so I can lay here and wish I was dead."

At that moment Topenga flew into the room and dropped a letter in Harry's lap. He opened it with shaky hands and was surprised by the brevity of it.

I hope you're alright. I'll see you on the train.

"The train!" Harry exclaimed, "We're leaving, I forgot!"

"So you're still going?"

"Well, yes, I guess so."

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"Then you'd better get dressed. I took the liberty of having breakfast brought up for you. And you'll find some of Severus' potion on the tray. He was rather unwilling to part with it for you're sake, but I managed to convince him." Dumbledore stood and smiled down at Harry. "Things will work out as they should. Again, if you need to talk, Harry, you know where to find me."

"Thank you, sir."

"Enjoy your trip."

* * *

Showered, dressed, and nervous as hell, Harry stepped onto the platform and looked around. He spotted Hagrid at the far end, near the locomotive, towering over everyone else. He headed that way and saw Seamus leading Susan onto the train, obviously having changed his mind about staying. A group of Slytherins leered at him as he passed, but he ignored them completely.

He pushed his way through a cramped bottleneck of students and came clear on the other side, only to find Sara standing before him and he stopped short. Their easy, comfortable manner was gone. They hesitated to touch each other and didn't. Neither wanted to speak first, and both were visibly anxious. *She knows.* Harry thought.

Sara regarded him with slightly downcast eyes, afraid to look at him, and when he said nothing she thought *He knows*.

Deciding to get it over with, he extended his hand and she took it, relieved. She smiled tentatively, awkwardly, but Harry got the impression the touch had told her nothing. "Are you ready?" He asked,

holding his breath.

"Yes, you?"

He nodded.

"Ron is holding our seats."

Harry noticed the platform was rapidly emptying as Hagrid ushered everyone onto the train, which was powering up for departure.

"Hullo, Harry! Hullo, Sara, fine mornin' for travel if you ask me."

"Hi Hagrid."

"You two better board soon, or you'll be left standin' ere and all your stuff on the way t' King's Cross!" He looked at their faces and saw the tension between them. "You two look as guilty as can be! Somethin' amiss?"

"No!" They answered in unison, then smiled, uncomfortable.

"Come on, Sara." Harry said, "Happy Christmas, Hagrid."

"Same to you Harry, and you too, Sara. You kids have fun, but be careful. You never know who's lurking around Diagon Alley."

"We will." Harry smiled, "Have fun in France!" and led Sara onto the train.

Ron was leaning out of the cabin and smiled when he saw their approach. "I thought you'd missed the train!" He grinned, "Harry, you're always so *last minute*."

"Sorry, Ron. We were talking to Hagrid."

"Well, come on, we saved you a seat."

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The cabin was crowded with Ron and Hermione, Seamus and Susan, and to Harry's dismay, Ginny. He smiled politely at her, but moved on quickly to address everyone else, who peppered him with questions about how much trouble he was in with Dumbledore. No one believed him when he said no punishment of any kind had been mentioned.

Harry ignored Ginny completely, which was hard because she stared at him unwaveringly and he could feel her contempt radiating out at him. She was furious, he knew, and it gave his already frazzled nerves even more of a jump. No matter what he did, no matter how much he let himself sink into the lively conversation, no matter how many good thoughts he forced into his mind, he simply could not relax and Ginny's silent play was pushing him to the edge of sanity. He had no idea how he would endure this situation all the way to London.

* * *

As the sky darkened over the countryside, Harry looked out the window, depressed and trying not to show it. Sara had been silent at his side for quite some time and now she leaned against him, holding his arm and slipping her free hand into his. He squeezed it and brushed his thumb along her fingers. He laid his other hand over the one on his arm, his head resting on the glass, his eyes on the blur of passing nothingness.

Ginny left the cabin without a word, but then Ron and Hermione were asleep, Seamus was drifting off, and Susan was reading. They only people for her to inform were Harry and Sara.

"I'll be right back." Sara said and was past the curtains before Harry could respond. He'd opened his mouth to detain her and closed it now, fearful and swallowing a giant lump in his throat.

Sara caught up to Ginny, grabbed her arm, and spun Ron's little sister around to face her. Ginny shrunk, intimidated by Sara's anger.

"Leave him alone!" Sara spat, "Can't you see he loves *me*? He doesn't want you, Ginny, and you're *really* starting to get on my nerves. He's *my* boyfriend and you haven't taken your eyes off him since we stepped on the train!"

"What do *you* know?" Ginny snapped, "You don't know *anything*, let alone how he feels! *I've* known him since I was ten years old and *you*," she stepped closer in challenge, "you don't know him at all." Sara angered at Ginny's audacity. "Don't tempt me, *little girl*, I could reduce you to ashes with a flick of my wrist."

"Then do it! I'd prefer death to your presence."

"And why are *you* so angry?" Sara asked, "Was I not polite to you at all times? Did I not *try* to be your friend? But no, you *always* had to cause a scene. Do you really think Harry found that nonsense endearing? He cares about you, Ginny, he calls you family, but if you think for one moment he'll ever reciprocate your little adolescent crush you're an even bigger fool than I thought. *Stay away from him*. And don't come back to the cabin unless you care to test my patience."

Sara left her standing there, glowering after her as she returned to the cabin and slid onto the seat next to Harry. He still sat in the same position, head tipped against the window, dejected and troubled. Sara inched closer and put an arm around his waist. His arm went around her shoulders and she lay her head on his chest.

"Harry, I love you. No matter what, I always will."

He turned to her, held her eyes for a moment, then pulled her into a slow, but fierce embrace.

* * *

"Has Severus Snape checked in yet?" Sara asked as they arrived at *The Royal Wescott*, a fine and very expensive hotel just down the street from The Leaky Cauldron.

"Yes he has, Miss Lemke, and he's left a message for you."

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Harry looked around at the lobby as she read it, marveling at the rich and exquisitely tasteful decor, heavy with marble and brass.

"Harry," She said, recapturing his attention, "He's made a late dinner reservation at one of the hotel's restaurants. *Angelico's*. He'll meet us there." She thanked the clerk and lead him swiftly to the elevators. "We'd better hurry. There isn't much time and we'll need to dress."

Twenty minutes later they were back in the elevator. Harry wore the Versace suit from Harvey Nichols and his favorite tie. Sara wore a pretty blue sweater with one of her many longish black skirts and comfortable shoes with a low heel. She held Harry's arm as they stepped into the lobby and he escorted her deeper into the hotel. They spoke to each other awkwardly and infrequently and both felt the distance that had been between them since they'd stood on the platform of the Hogwarts Express. Snape stood as they approached the table, for Sara, not Harry, and she smiled brilliantly at him.

"Severus, you look great!" She kissed his cheek.

Harry had to admit, Snape looked sharp with clean, neatly trimmed hair and wearing a handsome Armani suit. He didn't doubt for a second that Sara had bought it for him, and felt less guilty about his own attire.

They sat and Harry grew perturbed as Snape relentlessly smirked at him. He got the feeling Snape knew something about him that he found mildly amusing. That meant that Snape probably knew he'd kissed Ginny in the library, and if so he would have told Sara the first chance he got. It would explain Sara's reluctant manner and his guilt and shame threatened to swallow him whole. He lowered his eyes and studied the menu.

Since they'd eaten a few hours before on the train and Harry's stomach was twisted with anxiety, he ordered only a bowl of soup and a small side salad. Sara ordered the same and Snape got a big sirloin steak with a baked potato, asparagus with hollandaise sauce, a Caesar salad, and a bottle of Bordeaux. Their salads and Snape's wine came right away, along with water for Sara and Harry and some freshbaked bread with garlic butter. Harry ate his salad half-heartedly, not really hungry at all, and Sara also considered her food with lack-luster disinterest.

Suddenly there was a sickening smell beneath Harry's nose and his stomach turned and he almost gagged. He pushed away the glass and glared at Snape, who delighted in torturing him with the strong red wine.

"*Alcohol* anyone?" He grinned, enjoying Harry's lethargy and Sara's grimace of distaste. "Actually, I'm sure they would have some very fine *rum* in a place like this."

Sara gave him a slightly amused, but stern glance. "Shut-up, Severus, or I'll zap you with lightning right here under the table."

"You know, the two of you are extraordinarily dull tonight. One would think you'd just left a funeral."

"It's been a long and trying day, Snape." Harry said, "Let's just have a quiet dinner and go back to our rooms."

"Fine."

Sara hung her head in overpowering shame. It was clear that Harry knew, but was gentleman enough to not speak of it. She thanked him inwardly for his silence, but was eaten up by it as well. She needed desperately to confess her indiscretion, but needed equally to leave the subject verbally unapproached. She needed to understand fully what she'd done before she could even begin to explain herself to Harry.

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She thought of Malfoy, alone in the Slytherin dungeons, and wondered what he was thinking. Did he think they had a chance? Probably not, Draco was level-headed and realistic, but he was almost certainly hopeful and for this she felt bad. His affection for her was easy before because she always let him know where he stood with her and never failed to show unwavering dedication to her relationship with Harry. Now, after confessing her attraction for Lucius to him and sharing emotional moments with Draco in her tower, then of course, kissing him madly like she'd wanted to do once or twice before, the walls that separated them had fallen and all the lines were blurred.

She glanced at Harry and saw he was miserable, staring into his soup and stirring it absentmindedly, obviously lost in thought. She recalled her confrontation with Ginny and felt even worse for him. It must be hard, to have such animosity between two people he loved and she hoped he hadn't heard what was said in the train's corridor. True, they had kept their voices low, but they hadn't exactly been whispering. She felt wrong for what she'd done to Ginny. She'd behaved as if Harry was a possession of hers, someone she'd laid claim to, when really Harry was with her because he chose to be, not because she had some right to him. She made up her mind to write to Ginny and apologize later in the night, not that it would do any good. What was done was done and would never be smoothed over, forgiven or forgotten. Still, the apology was completely necessary.

When she looked up again, Harry had finished his soup and was looking back at her, a hint of a smile on his face for her benefit, his expression morose. He took her hand and held her eyes.

"I think I'll go lay down if you don't mind, Sara."

"Not at all, Harry." She tried to smile for him, "Are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm just tired."

"Then I'll go with you."

"Stay as long as you want. Really, I don't mind. Don't let Snape's *impossibly clean* appearance go to waste." At this he smiled wider.

"I won't be long." She smiled and he stood and kissed her cheek. "Goodnight, Professor." He said, forgetting to be snide. He left, managing to look ruffled in his impeccable suit.

"What's *his* problem?" Snape asked when Harry had gone.

"He knows. He hasn't said anything, but it's obvious. I can't believe he's still speaking to me."

"I have to admit," he said, cutting the last piece of steak. "I did get that impression. I swear I didn't tell him. I can't imagine Pomfrey would have done such a thing, either, not that she knows anything about that part. Or the Headmaster. He knows I think, but he would never betray you, even to his favorite student."

"Draco would never. Perhaps we weren't alone."

"Perhaps."

The server arrived to clear the empty dishes and Sara asked for a white Russian. She wanted totally to separate herself from the desperation and self-loathing she had been wallowing in all day long. Severus was surprised she'd ordered a drink, but it was heavy with cream and the strong taste of the liquor was muted by it. She knew it would sit well and drank it quickly when it came. She ordered another and talked with Severus as he enjoyed his expensive Bordeaux. She had never seen him have more than one drink and relaxed in his company as his words picked up the slightest slur and his eyes took on a cloudiness that could only mean he was getting drunk. His manor was easier, his sarcasm wittier, and as she slipped into an altered state she was grateful for his presence.

She ordered drink after drink until she felt she could have no more and the restaurant was showing signs of closing. Her anxiety diminished and feeling that her fear and betrayal were surreal, from a dream she'd had, she felt whole again and gave in to her laughter when he made jokes and slipped naturally into a more normal mood.

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They were having a great time, neither of them wanting the night to end quite yet, so they moved to the bar at the back of the room.

Two glasses of wine later, Snape excused himself and went to the men's room and Sara was left to amuse herself, but without Snape's mirth to distract her, her misery came back full force and she slumped in her seat.

Summoning the bartender, she got them each another drink and asked for a cigarette, which she took out onto the restaurant's deck.

The icy London night air enveloped her immediately and she let it sober her a little as she smoked. Snow drifted lazily down from the trees and she tried not to cry. Struggling with her emotions, finally managing to swallow the lump in her throat.

It was the last thing she expected to see, the Raven flying toward her, but she wasn't surprised by it. She ripped the letter from its beak and swatted it away, but it returned and lit on the railing.

"Haven't you tormented me enough?" She hissed at it, "You dare write to me while your son spends the Christmas holidays alone and abandoned! *I hate you*, Lucius, you miserable cradle-robbing *Deatheater*! You're poison even to your own family! And what do you expect from me? Twenty years my senior! Like your wrinkled old face is appealing to me! If you were half the man your son is perhaps it would, but you're not and you make me sick."

The raven squawked and spoke. "*Read the letter.*" It said in its strange bird voice.

Sara laughed, incredulous. "That's not how the story goes. Poe never said *anything* about a letter." She laughed again, realizing her level of intoxication, but not caring. "Quote this!" She raised her middle finger in the most well-known of universal signs and waved it in front of the raven's face. "Gives a whole new meaning to flipping the bird." She giggled, flicked her cigarette away and walked back to the doors. "*Quote the wicked raven.*" she muttered.

It spoke again as she laid a hand on the knob, its voice low, menacing, and with a frightening and ethereal human quality. "*Nevermore.*"

* * *

Snape kept her steady on her feet as he led her back to the rooms on the topmost floor. She held fast to his arm, the raven heavy on her mind, until they stopped before her door. Snape bent and kissed her cheek, something she couldn't remember him ever doing before. She smiled up at him and he smiled back.

"I had a wonderful time, my dear." He said, "Thank you. And don't worry about Potter, Sara, you'll be fine."

"Don't be so sure." She whispered, wishing he hadn't mentioned it, "Goodnight, Severus. I'll see you at breakfast."

She stumbled inside and closed the door.

Harry, she saw, was fast asleep, the television on and tuned to the BBC. The noise was unbearable and she turned it off. There was a little clock-radio on the nightstand and she turned this on and found a classical music station, turning it up, but not enough to wake him.

Rummaging through her unpacked suitcase, she found Harry's old Oxford, the one he'd given her at the end of last term, which she always kept with her wherever she went, and carried it to the bathroom where she was violently sick. She brushed her teeth and put on the slightly graying white shirt. Sitting down on the edge of the tub, she let her head fall into her hands, and cried long and hard into them. She could hear the raging blizzard outside, could feel it radiating from her, but was powerless to stop it. Thunder crashed and she found it satisfying, a loud and passionate testament of her overwhelming misery.

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Finally, she crawled beneath the covers and turned on her side to stare at Harry's back and suddenly she needed him desperately. She wouldn't wake him, not that he wanted to comfort her for her indiscretions, so she curled up to him, not daring to put an arm around him.

Harry lay there in the dark, eyes wide open, wishing he knew what to say to comfort her and knowing

it was his own fault she was drunk again and sick from it, and it was because of him and his fractured affection that she cried in the bathroom. He'd heard her, unable to go to her, and despised himself for it. He needed her now as he thought of Ginny and how foolish he'd been and he could feel Sara shaking as she pressed so close against him, but he didn't deserve to have her so near. In fact, he thought, he didn't deserve her at all.

* * *

As Sara woke to the sounds of the shower and the bright glare of winter sunshine, her spirits were darker than they were the previous night. She felt positively ill and reached for the potion before she could be sick with nowhere to go but onto the balcony. It rose in the back of her throat and she kept it down with difficulty, hoping for a single moment when she might knock back the potion and cure the unrest in her stomach. Finally, the moment came and she was glad of it, thinking she could avoid being sick no longer and would never have made it onto the terrace.

The potion went to work right away, but she laid back against the pillows to gather her thoughts.

Kissing Malfoy seemed in the distant past, though it had been only the night before last. It seemed unreal, blurred around the edges like a dream, but she had done it, of that there was no doubt, and the worst part was that she had *wanted to*.

Before she could slip into yet another bout of self-loathing, there came a light knock at the door and she rose to answer it, pulling on a robe that Harry had thoughtfully laid across the foot of the bed for her.

It was a hotel employee, who smiled at her disarray and apologized for waking her.

"You dropped this in Angelico's last night." He handed her the dreadful letter the raven had brought to her on the deck. She turned white at the sight of it and remembered with a shudder the raven's dark and terrible voice. "*Nevermore*."

"Thank you." She said and tried to smile, then hurriedly grabbed a handful of bills from the purse she sometimes carried and shoved them into the man's hand.

She fell back against the door, her legs like jelly, threatening to drop her on the floor as she read the envelope. *Sara Lemke, The Royal Wescott Hotel, London.*

"How does he know?" she whispered aloud, "How can he be so *quick*?"

She folded it, hiding it away in the pocket of her robe as Harry emerged from the shower, his hair wet, but combed, and smelling of the cologne she'd bought him last summer. He still looked wretched. His eyes the same sad story as last night. Any bit of happiness she'd felt was dashed, her sin struck her heart anew.

"Morning, Harry." She said, barely above a whisper, overcome once again by shame.

"Are you alright?" He asked, staring at her, looking suddenly shocked and fearful.

She didn't understand this unspoken reaction, but had noticed it as everything Harry felt always showed on his face. "I'm ok." She tried to force a smile, but it slipped easily away. Harry looked at the floor and went to the bed. He turned on the BBC and sat, but she could tell he wasn't really watching it.

She wanted to sit down beside him, hold his hand, lay her head on his shoulder, but she knew she shouldn't expect such welcome from him, not after what she had done. And here she stood, wearing his shirt and with a letter from Lucius Malfoy hidden in her pocket. She grabbed an outfit from her suitcase and headed for the shower.

Immediately she started the water running and sat down to read the letter.

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Dearest Sara,

First, let me tell you I thoroughly enjoyed your performance at the Yule Ball. You have a tremendous talent, though I can only hope to someday hear you in person. You look irresistible in black. I could choose no better color.

Also, I couldn't help noticing your newfound attraction to my son. Of course I know he is taken with you and who wouldn't be, but I was under the impression, by your own words, that the feeling was not returned. My, but you are a cunning and manipulative girl! Either you are a liar, or perhaps you are trying to draw my attention away from someone else. Could this be the third of your little trio? It leads me to wonder if this person, the coward I seek, is the same that showers you with affection and dances so close?

As for you, my devious one, my belladonna, you will not disperse of me with your false play with Draco, and you will not discourage me from my pursuits. And as for Draco, you will discontinue your curious liaisons or you will find him cold as morning breaks.

Come to me soon, beautiful one, for I lose patience with every passing day.

L.

The letter fell to dust between her fingers. She looked at the remnants of it on the tile, horrified. She could prove his threats to no one. She could no longer bring this letter to Uncle Albus as evidence of Lucius' treachery. All the others he'd sent had been cryptic and gave away nothing. She sat in disbelief. If she touched Draco again, his father had plainly said he'd kill him. And he had called her *his belladonna*. A striking word with a twisted meaning. "Beautiful lady" in Italian, or another name for deadly nightshade, an aptly named plant with berries of midnight purple, fatal if taken in any dose. She wondered what it meant.

She swept the dust into her hand, dumped it in the trash, and prepared to undress. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and stopped dead at her own reflection. What she saw explained Harry's shock and produced a similar feeling in her. The black in her hair, which just two days ago had been a strip about three inches wide, now wrapped around the back of her head, almost to the

center, and had moved forward as well, leaving only one tendril of gold in front, just enough to frame her face. "Oh God," she whispered, "It's *never* been this bad."

* * *

Harry held Sara's hand as they left the hotel for the rental, an SUV just in case snow and ice became a problem at some point during their stay. After all, winters could be brutal in England and freak storms seemed to follow Sara around. Plus, they had things to cart out to the cottage and the spacious vehicle was just the ticket. Harry had brought his old Beatles CD and they played it loudly in lieu of talking. Sara took to singing along and Harry listened.

They found it easier to talk once they had something to talk about, and wandered countless furniture stores, discussing colors and patterns and eras, something Harry knew little about. After awhile, he let Sara do most of the choosing and simply said whether or not he liked it. It seemed wrong in both their minds to be furnishing a home after what had happened, but it had been their plan for weeks and so they were going through with it because it was easier than not doing it at all.

Sara had flipped a good deal of blonde hair over the black side of her head and it helped, but only to a point. It troubled Harry to his very core to see it so profound. Even when they'd met and she'd spent several months alone and locked away with her grief, her parents dead and Voldemort tormenting her, it was nowhere near this bad. He didn't think he could feel any worse, but managed a nod in reference to a low velvet couch of scarlet and brass in the Greek revival style for the bedroom.

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After selecting furnishings for the living room, big fluffy couches in dark purple velvet and chairs in silk a lighter shade of the same color, Harry was all shopped out, but Sara's mood was steadily brightening with every purchase. Instead of suggesting they break for lunch, he simply escorted her and shared what he could of her building enthusiasm. They chose beautiful handmade rugs from the Orient and the Middle-East, sleek Egyptian torchiers that Harry agreed with completely, sturdy mahogany tables for the kitchen and dining room, wardrobes for both bedrooms, elegant brass tables with glass tops for 'here and there' as Sara called it, and any number of odds and ends along the way. Sara arranged for everything to be delivered, and paid handsomely to have it done right away, as she explained they were only away from school for a few days and had to arrange everything now. Her money was met with no resistance whatsoever. Not one store said they'd have to wait.

All that was left was beds. As it was, Harry thought they must have visited every furniture store in London, but they drove to yet another, which Sara said had a huge selection of the finest England had to offer. She wasn't kidding. The store was immense and had every style of bed imaginable, and some no one would ever imagine at all. They were shown around after Sara produced Mr. Sanders' photos and described the other things she'd bought for the room. After only twenty minutes, they were in total agreement on the bed they would someday share. Harry hadn't acquiesced as he'd done so many times already just because her eyes lit up at the sight of it, he agreed because it was gorgeous, all brass and Greek in style with tall and beautifully ornate posts and rails for curtains, which Sara ordered in white silk.

The guest bed was easier, since it didn't have to be so very grand as the master bed itself, and they picked out something nice quickly and left for a late lunch. Fast food was in order, since they still had more shopping to do and then they would finally be off to view the cottage for the first time.

They ate in the truck as Harry drove them to Macy's, which they tore through, getting bedding and curtains and towels and a big stereo. Plus a few clocks and a laundry hamper that caught Sara's eye. Next they visited a discount department store, where they loaded up on light bulbs, toiletries, soap for the dishwasher, soap for the laundry, a bunch of cds and several cases of soda, which was a muggle luxury sorely missed at Hogwarts. A lot of the things a new home needed had already been ordered by Sara and Mr. Sanders had graciously taken delivery, so the time they spent in the store was relatively short. Before long, they were on their way to the coast, the excitement of it having finally embraced them both.

* * *

The drive had been plowed and the snow cleared from the walk, and Mr. Sanders met them on the front step with a smile and an enthusiastic handshake for each of them. Harry noticed right away he didn't look so down-trodden as when they'd met, his clothes were new and his appearance neat. All signs of poverty having vanished from his person and Harry assumed Sara paid him handsomely for his loyal assistance.

He showed them in and they wandered the rooms as a trio, Mr. Sanders pointing out the washer and dryer which had come last week, the stainless steel dishwasher that had been installed, their new refrigerator and he opened every cupboard to reveal the dishes, the pots and pans, the silver, and all the other utensils Sara had ordered and explained that a chef had been brought in from London to place them properly.

As Sara examined everything Harry surveyed the back yard through the French doors off the kitchen. Sara's patio was knee deep in snow, but he could see a large storage shed off in the distance, presumably to hold all the outdoor furnishings until spring. Yet another addition she'd failed to mention.

Harry moved to the living room where he found a good supply of seasoned wood and set to building a fire. The heat was on and it was comfortable, but he wanted the glow and the added warmth. He felt happy, wandering the new house with Sara, preparing it for their future together, and the thought of Ginny faded like an old memory, or a stain that has been bleached, but still remains, a faint representation of what it used to be.

With the fire crackling away, Harry donned his boots and headed back out to the truck for the stuff they'd bought. He was halfway down the walk when Mr. Sanders came running after him and calling out frantically.

"Mr. Potter!" he yelled as he cautiously jogged along the cement, "Mr. Potter! I'll get that, don't trouble yourself!" Finally, he'd caught up. "I'll unload the car, you go back inside and enjoy your new house. As for me, I've already seen it."

"Then you can help me. And *please* call me Harry. If you continue to call me 'Mr. Potter' I'll end up calling you 'Professor'." Harry laughed, opening the back of the truck.

"It sure did turn out nice, Harry." Mr. Sanders said as he loaded his arms with shopping bags. "Sara has impeccable taste for a girl her age. And I have to say, you're quite the lucky young man. I hope you know that."

"I do," Harry smiled sadly, "believe me, I do."

Three trips later they had emptied everything but the stereo, which was enormous and they carried it in together, then set to hooking it up in the living room, in place of where a TV would go at Sara's instruction. A truck engine rumbled closer and closer down the driveway and Sara ran out to meet it, ignoring her coat in her excitement.

"I wonder what it is?!" She exclaimed as she threw open the door.

It turned out to be the living room furniture, the scroll-like couch for the bedroom, and the glass tables, which was nice because at least the front room could be filled and they would finally have someplace to sit.

Falling into the big sofa, Harry's arm went around her and he kissed her head. Her fingers entwined his.

"It's perfect, Sara. Really perfect. I love this room!"

"So do I, Harry. I can't wait until the rugs and the lamps come. And everything else we got! Can you believe this? Our own house! And it's so very lovely and quaint."

"It's almost home." He smiled, "And soon it will be. Sara, don't let anything come between us. Don't let anything stop this from happening."

His eyes had saddened again and her guilt burned away her euphoria. She turned her eyes to his, for the first time really, since the Yule Ball. "Harry? Do you still want to marry me? I'll understand if you don't or if you're not sure. Really, I will."

"Of course I do! If I don't I swear I'll go to my grave a bachelor. The question is, do you still want to marry *me*?"

"I do, Harry. What an honor it would be to be 'Mrs. Potter'. Only maybe you should reconsider your choice of brides."

"Reconsider! Sara, whatever do you mean?"

"Maybe we're wrong. Maybe we're making a big mistake. Maybe, Harry, this is all just some grandiose dream and someday we'll wake up from it."

"Does this look like a dream? Sara, look where we're sitting! In *our* house!"

"No matter what we'll still own the property. We'll still build our palace, I'll do it alone if it comes to that, even if it's nothing more than a monument to broken dreams."

Harry looked desperate and on the edge of tears. He looked about ready to shatter and Sara was instantly sorry for being so blunt. "Sara," He asked, "Do you want to break up with me? Is that what this is about?"

"Break up with you? Are you mad? I'm scared, Harry. I'm afraid of not doing things right. That I'll make some stupid rash decision and lose you completely."

"Never. I would forgive you anything."

She reached out and touched his face, a tiny spark of reassurance in her smile. "I never want to hurt you. Remember that, as long as you live."

He kissed her for the first time in two days.

"I got a little surprise for you guys!" Mr. Sanders called from the kitchen, clanging around in the cupboards, then coming closer. "A christening is in order!" He came into the room and set down two glasses and a bottle of Dom Perignon on ice, which he placed before them on the new glass table. Harry smiled brightly. "But you didn't bring Sara a glass!"

"Yeah, Greg Sanders, go get me a glass!"

"The glasses are for you and Harry." He grinned, "I thought this should be a private moment."

"Nonsense!" Sara said.

Harry headed to the kitchen and brought back a third glass, then set to opening the champagne.

After a quick toast Mr. Sanders brought them out on the step for a photograph. They slung their arms around each other, Harry dangling the bottle of champagne over Sara's shoulder, they held up their glasses and grinned at the camera.

* * *

The next two days were spent at the cottage, with Harry spending most of his time at the bottom of the cliff with a piece of chalk, drawing the grand archway for the watery tunnel. He'd noticed bubbles escaping from the bottom of the wall, beneath the water and had an idea there might be a little cave behind it. That would certainly make things easier, as there would be less to be removed. If he was lucky, it might even be a few feet wide. He couldn't wait to get to work on it.

The morning of Christmas Eve was spent in Diagon Alley, shopping for last minute gifts for the guests

they would have later that evening. Plus, Sara opted to buy a new broom, since she didn't own one, for the trip back to school. She got a Lightning Mach 2, the newest broom available, of course, and Harry was green with envy. He loved the sleek brass handle with a grip that warmed or cooled the hands, depending on the weather, as well as the little etched lightning bolt on the end that looked curiously like his scar.

Having seen an antique serpentine armband in the display window on their way past *Forgotten Treasures*, Sara stopped to gaze at it through the glass. Her face lit up, then she smiled softly and backed away. About a block later, Harry suddenly announced that he'd forgotten to pick up Ron's gift and would Sara mind going along without him. She gracefully acquiesced and walked off alongside Snape in the crowded holiday street, glancing back once to give him a sweet smile and a wave of her hand. Of course, he went directly back to *Forgotten Treasures*.

"I thought he already got Ron's present?" Sara asked Snape.

"I don't exactly keep track. Sorry." He grinned, "Who knows what Potter's up to. Probably sneaking off to Knockturn Alley for all I know."

They were stopped short by a whirl of black, blocking their path in the blink of an eye. Snape already had his wand out.

"Now now, Severus, there's no need for hostility."

"Lucius." Snape growled, putting away his wand. He felt Sara's hand wrap nervously around his arm.

"Speaking of Knockturn Alley..."

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"Hello Sara." Lucius turned his eyes to her and her breath caught in her throat. A hint of a smile touched his lips.

Her face was emotionless. "Hello Lucius." She said, thinking he looked fabulous, better than that, actually. His clothes were so discriminating and all in black. His cloak was lined with jet black fur and the clasp was a platinum snake with a ruby eye. The asp that topped his cane shone brightly, and his hair was long and flowing over his shoulders.

"Severus, might I borrow Sara for a moment? There was something I wanted to discuss with her about Draco, but it's a private matter. You understand."

Snape was all set to protest when Sara squeezed his arm. "I'll speak to him." She said, "I won't be long, Severus. Why don't you head into the store and get what you were after. Mr. Malfoy and I will be right across the street getting a drink. I'll find you."

Snape nodded hesitantly at Lucius before entering the little shop that sold very obscure potion ingredients, though he stood in the window, watching him lead her across the cobblestones to the little pub on the corner, his hand on the small of her back.

"Nice letter, Lucius, does it tell you anything that you've had to resort to threatening me? Obviously, I'm not interested."

Lucius gave a soft laugh and said nothing, his winter eyes, alight with mild amusement, focused on her as they ordered their drinks.

"I already know the person you are, and you're letter only confirms what you've denied."

"Does the person I am really matter to you? After all, we're not getting married."

"That's a fact." Her brow furrowed with anger. "Besides, we all know what becomes of *your* wives."

"Why all this hostility? Sara, have I ever been unkind to you? Have I ever hurt you in any way?"

The drinks came and they moved to a dark corner and stood, facing each other, Sara sipping hers as if trying to draw strength from it. "You know the answer to that. Don't play sly with me, Lucius."

He brushed a gloved hand across her cheek, "*Belladonna*. The perfect name for you. Beautiful, cloaked in midnight purple, and easily the death of any man."

"Were you planning to throw yourself off a building?"

"I had someone else in mind, actually. But let's not linger on sore subjects." Suddenly his hand snaked around her waist, pulled her close against him and something exploded down her spine. Sara took in a sharp breath and he gazed down at her, eyes smiling.

"Don't think I'm kissing you." She said, her voice unconvincing.

"I could if I wanted to." He bent his head to within an inch of hers. "But I'm afraid I won't. Sorry to disappoint you."

"And why not? Isn't that what you want? But no, not you. You would rather play with me, see if you can force me to surrender my will, is that it? That's not going to work and I'll tell you why. Because I despise you."

"Or perhaps your resistance is out of loyalty to someone else?" He lowered his voice to a whisper,

"Much more of your hostility and that someone may get himself hurt. Men *will* fight amongst themselves, after all, and I don't like competition."

"How dare you threaten me! And for the second time this weekend! What is *wrong with you* that you think this is ok? I'm seventeen, Lucius, less than half your age. I go to school with *your son*. Don't you think there's *maybe* something wrong here?"

"The only thing wrong here is a goody-two-shoes little girl who plays with the hearts of boys and isn't mature enough finish what she started."

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Her voice grew nervous, "I didn't start this."

"Did you not set out to distract me, my dear Sara, hold my attention while your *friend* rooted through my house?"

Sara bit her lip.

"Well, my attention you have."

"I don't want it."

He smiled with a bit of the devil, "We both know otherwise."

Sara sighed. She was still pressed against him, trapped in his arm while his other hand brushed the hair away from her face. "Don't do that. Your gloves pull my hair." She tried to sound annoyed, but it sounded more like she wanted him to remove his gloves, which he promptly did. She jumped from his touch and instinctively his grip on her waist tightened. Images, mostly dark, flew across her mind like a flock of ravens and she saw him sitting in a chair in his house, looking up at her with a blank expression, then it was over, all the images gone quietly into memory.

"Let me go."

"I think not." he stroked the side of her face, her eyes falling closed at his touch. "I've missed you, Sara. You've stopped writing to me."

"I can't, don't you see? Lucius, I'm in love with someone. And I have morals. I'm not a betrayer."

Instantly her mind swam with guilt at the thought of Draco.

"I'm not so sure your little Gryffindor friend would agree with that, do you?"

She sighed, defeated. "You don't have to kill Draco over *one kiss*. I care for him, I respect him, and I guess I even love him in some strange way. In case your raven was too far away to hear, I was telling him it was never going to happen."

Lucius smiled and Sara felt a huge weight lift from her conscious. Hopefully, she'd just prevented Draco's death with an honest confession.

"A rather affectionate way to let the boy down. Pity, I seem to warrant only the *worst* possible treatment from you. We're cut from the same fabric, Draco and I. If only you could see in *me* what you see in him, a letdown might come a little easier for me." His hand slipped into her hair and tangled at the base of her head, the simplest immobilizer, and Sara was jerked forward, her head slightly tipped back. Suddenly his face hovered so close to hers Sara could feel his breath tickling her skin and her nerves all came pleasantly alive. Her eyes drifted shut and she found it hard to breathe. She rested her hand on his cheek, forgetting who and what he was, knowing only the thrill of his vicinity and the dark energy that radiated from him.

His voice was a harsh whisper and she thought she could feel him trembling as he held her against his chest with a dangerously strong arm. "You, my dearest Sara, you are my only weakness." he brushed his lips against hers, "Return to Malfoy Manor and let us finish what we started. I can't let you deny us this over a fledgling boy who will still be there when all is said and done."

"But I would no longer deserve him." She whispered as her hand slipped into his beautiful long hair,

"Can't you see, if I give in to this it will destroy me."

"No, Sara, it will destroy you if you *do not*."

She felt his lips again, like an electric feather. "How can you be so cruel to me?"

"My patience grows thin." He kissed the corner of her mouth and she shuddered inwardly.

"Lucius," she whispered, almost breathless, "Lucius, let me go. Please let me go."

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The arm that held her fast loosened, coming to rest casually on her hip and the hand in her hair slipped away. "I have something for you." He said and reached into his cloak, withdrawing a small box, which he gave to her. "That's a portkey. It will deliver you to Malfoy Manor. You could come and go as you please and no one would be the wiser, although you need use it only once. You know, I have a little divining talent myself, and I know you would never tell him."

She put the little box that held the portkey into her pocket, once again feeling the anger of having been manipulated by him emotionally. "That may be true, but how could I ever forgive myself for *dirtying* him with your kind of loathsome Slytherin betrayal?"

Lucius stepped closer and spoke in a low growl, "You will not speak of your little love interest to me, understand me well, or you find out what cruel really is."

"Well, Lucius, which is it, kisses or threats? All this bouncing back and forth is really quite exhausting."

Instantly she was back in his grip, his face hovering only a breath away, his arm so tight she could hardly breathe. His voice purred, as it so often did. "You *know* what I prefer."

She sighed and found herself moving toward him, though a muted voice in the back of her mind demanded she stop. Her eyes slipped shut and she felt his lips on hers, then he pulled away, releasing his arm, his hand brushed her face. "The portkey," he said, "come to me soon or I will come to you." He went a few feet away, straightening his cloak and called back to her, "Come Sara, I will return you to your escort."

* * *

Snape used a *Reducto* charm on their luggage, which then fit nicely into Harry's backpack and together, they set off for the long journey back to school. Sara had to keep slowing down because the broom was so fast and she didn't have the skill to handle the speed. Finally, she spotted a clearing below and headed down to it. Harry and Snape followed.

"I hate this broom!" She said, exasperated, "I'm going to get killed trying to ride this thing! Harry, switch brooms with me. Give me the Firebolt."

Harry made the swap and grinned sheepishly, "We'll switch back when we get home."

"Keep it if you like it. I certainly don't like it. A muscle twitches and you're suddenly doing loops or something. Besides, going that fast makes me sick."

"You can't be serious! Sara, this is a very expensive broom!"

Sara shrugged and climbed onto the more familiar Firebolt. "*I don't like it.*" Off she went, leaving Snape and Harry scrambling to mount their brooms and catch up.
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15. The Anger & the Eloquence

"Why does *he* have to be here?" Harry eyed Malfoy from across the room. "I still don't understand."
Sara glanced at Malfoy, in the parlor sitting with Snape and drinking a glass of eggnog spiked with some of Seamus' finest. He was dressed all in black, looked depressed, and drank more than he talked. Occasionally he glanced in Sara's direction and had turned his eyes from Harry's several times.
Brittany, the little third year, as well as Neville had recently gone to bed and Dumbledore had also retired for the night. Now it was just the three of them and Snape, who seemed to be keeping up with Draco when it came to eggnog. "Harry, I didn't think *you* of all people would want someone who had recently lost their parents to spend Christmas Eve alone in the dungeons."
"I don't want that, even for Malfoy, I just don't understand why it had to be *with us*." He cracked a smile and she laughed a little.
"I think you need more eggnog. What is that, your second in three hours?"
"My first. I just don't feel like it, I guess. Hey, I almost forgot!" He went to the closet and rummaged in his backpack, then returned with a gift for her.
"But we have to wait for morning!"
"This is an extra. An afterthought I suppose."
She unwrapped it and laughed. "I *knew* you already had Ron's present, Harry you liar! But I'm glad you lied. I really wanted this but can't be buying stuff for myself on Christmas Eve. I love you, Harry, you're too good to me."
"Your whole face lit up when you saw it." Harry said and smiled when she hugged him.
"Did you get Malfoy a present?" She cautiously ventured.
Harry turned red with anger. "Yes."
"He got you something, too." Sara tried to smile, but understood how awkward this situation must be for Harry, and Draco as well. She grew quiet for a moment, studying the floor, and when she finally looked at him again her face was distraught. "I'm not in love with him, Harry."
Harry smiled, amused. "I know that."
Her shoulders relaxed and she smiled a little.
"Come on." he said and put a leading arm around her shoulders, "let's get ready for bed."
Malfoy approached when he saw they were about to leave the room and the serpent armband suddenly came to life in Sara's hands and struck out at Draco, baring its gold fangs, and Malfoy leapt back.
"What the *hell!*" He yelled, surprised.
Harry grinned, "Oh, I forgot, I put a charm on it as well."
Sara laughed, but Draco only smiled coolly. "You know, Potter, I do remember *everything*. Payback's a bitch."
"What's with you and muggle cliché's?" Harry smirked.
"I do *read*, you know, Potter. Maybe you should try it sometime you might learn something."
Sara quickly interjected before they could get on a roll. "We were just getting our PJ's on. Maybe you should do the same. It's getting late."
"Ok." Malfoy smiled at her, "But I was wondering if I could talk to you for just a minute. *In private.*"
He gave Harry an annoyed glance.
Sara's face darkened. "Can't it wait until tomorrow?"
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Draco said nothing, just looked uncomfortable. Sara sighed, slightly annoyed, and turned to Harry.
"Do you mind?" She asked, "I'll just be a minute."
She led him onto the roof and closed the doors so they would be in the open and clearly visible through the glass. "Well Malfoy," she turned to face him, "what's on your mind?"
"So it's *Malfoy* again, is it?"
"Hasn't it always been?"
"You called me Draco Friday. I guess it just sounds nice coming from you. A little less harsh. You're angry at me. Why?"
"I'm not angry." She sighed, "It's just that I don't think now is a good time. He knows, Malfoy. I don't know how he found out and he hasn't even said anything, but he's different with me now. Like he's walking on eggshells."
"But who told him? Snape came right after us and watched the door, according to him, and he certainly wouldn't tell Potter."
She started pacing before him. "Maybe it's just that I danced with you all night. Lots of people saw that, even Seamus asked me about that, but Ron said Harry never came back from talking to Ginny. She came back alone. The raven was there, though." She hesitated, "I talked to your father earlier today. Malfoy, he threatened me. He'll kill you if we get any closer than we are right now. I hate him. There must be a way to get rid of him. I'll go crazy if I don't." She took a deep breath, "And he knows it's Harry for sure now. The raven was watching me all night and I never knew it."
"What did he do?" Draco implored, "What happened?"
"We were alone in the back of the pub by Knockturn Alley. We had a drink and like I said, he threatened me in a hundred ways. He didn't do anything. He could have, but didn't."
"What do you mean *he could have*?"
"I mean exactly that." She stopped pacing and looked at him, "There are things about Elementals that

most people don't know. Before my grandmother, who lived in Romania, passed away, she sent me copies of all the ancient books and scrolls about Elementals that told me everything I needed to know. Did you know that the Elemental is always female? That she always has a profound artistic talent, is a strong diviner, and is often moved to cry? Many have gone mad trying to suppress overactive emotions, the artistic outlet they possess being sorely inadequate, and my black streak is not normal, just a very rare magical phenomenon. Did you know that the Elemental also has a dark side? We are drawn to danger and are perilously curious about dark things. We're easily drawn in by it, all the while thinking we could walk away untouched by it. Malfoy, genetics have left me with little defense against someone like your father. If not for my will and my sense of right and wrong, I'd have none."

Malfoy looked sympathetic. "I didn't know any of that, but it stresses the point, I think. Sara, my father won't go away. You need help. Go to Dumbledore."

"Never."

"Then tell Harry."

"I can't. This is not his problem. Besides, I've put him in enough danger just by associating with him."

"And he's blind to it! Don't you think he should know there's a threat against him?"

"And what kind of person would I be if I couldn't resist Lucius on my own? A person worthy of Harry? Hardly. I will win this thing, even if one of us has to die for it."

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"Do you really think that's the wisest choice? You don't have to go it alone, you know. You can still win on your own terms, but with your friends behind you. Besides, it isn't like you to be so independent. I remember the way you hid behind Harry in the hall that day and at the Phantom you clung to Granger and hid behind Weasel. You desperately seek protection. Suddenly you decide to test yourself and risk everything to do it? Doesn't it make more sense that this is your weakness speaking to you? Convincing you to wait and see what happens? Sara, Snape was right when he said my father was no one to play with. You need to tell someone."

"I did." She said, getting defensive, "I told you."

"What am I supposed to do? I certainly can't control my father, I assumed you know that."

"If I need help, I'll ask for it, Malfoy. Don't worry about it. I have the Orb of Arassel and the strength of two great wizards around my neck."

"It didn't help you this afternoon."

"I wasn't wearing it."

"It's not enough. You need auras."

"The Elemental? Needs auras? I can protect myself, I assure you."

"You're crazy."

"You brought me out here for a reason. What was it?"

"I, um, I guess I just wanted to tell you that I don't expect anything. You know, after the Yule Ball. I know you'd had a lot to drink. Snape thinks we're practically engaged, but I know you're heart's set on that idiot Potter. I was hoping we could still be friends."

"Of course. I don't resent you, Malfoy, I just feel really awful about what I did to Harry. All that aside, I can't help thinking I chose my betrayal well." She smiled and he relaxed and finally grinned.

"It certainly was a worthy betrayal. I agree completely. Unfortunately, one I could repeat again and again."

She smiled again, saddened, "Then it will have to be only in your thoughts. It can never happen again."

"I know." He sighed, "But I want you to know you really made my century."

He smiled and she laughed, "Come on, *Draco*, let's go inside."

"Wait. I have something for you. Your Christmas present."

"In the morning."

"No. Not in front of your *boyfriend*." He pulled a tiny box from his pocket, "It's to say *thanks for everything* I guess."

She turned her back to the doors and opened it. Inside was a little pinky ring covered in diamonds and curious lavender stones. "Are those-"

"Purple diamonds." He informed her, "I thought they were nice. I guess they're pretty rare."

"It's beautiful." She said and put it on, "Thank you."

He smiled and moved to the doors, laying a hand on the handle. She slipped the little box into her pocket and went in.

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Harry was playing John Lennon's "Happy X-mas, War is Over" for the millionth time that night and appeared to be having a pleasant conversation with Snape, who also loved the Beatles and the two of them were discussing which songs they liked best. They stopped short when Draco finally wandered over. Sara immediately slipped her hand into Harry's and took up her eggnog, finishing it off. Draco announced he would be right back and disappeared down the hallway.

When he returned he was over-laden with gift bags and wearing dark green satin pajamas with a black silk robe and monogrammed slippers, his blond hair drifting around his shoulders. Harry burst out laughing and Sara thought he looked like someone she'd like to curl up next to. Silky and fine and ohso-pretty. Quickly she turned away and bit her lip, crushing the thought and internally berating herself for her inappropriate mental wanderings. She didn't like Malfoy that way, yet he affected her somehow and she hated it. He was pitiful next to Harry she thought, he was good looking in a flashy sort of way and the evil that lingered in him drew her against her will, but Harry was intense. He was

electric. She squeezed his hand. "Come on, let's get changed."

They entered the dressing room, where Harry kept his pajamas, a spare set of clothes and a school uniform just in case he overslept, which had happened once or twice when they'd stayed up too late playing around under the covers. It was with this thought that she closed the door and he roughly pushed her up against it, crashing into her as she met the kiss with surprise and returned it with fervor. Eventually finding herself crushed against the floor, Sara sighed as he kissed her neck. "Harry, there are people waiting for us."

"Slytherins." He mumbled. "*Drunk* Slytherins."

"Oh get off!" She laughed and shoved him onto his side, "We'll be going to bed soon enough and I prefer that to the floor. Restrain yourself for 20 minutes!"

"Unfortunately, restraint is something I'm running a little low on. You might have to employ an armed guard soon." he grinned, head propped on his elbow. "Hey, you want to make Christmas *really* special this year?"

A voice came rudely through the door, startling them both. It was Malfoy. "Hey! What are you doing? Sewing Potter some *real* pajamas?"

"Go away!" Harry yelled.

"Come out of there! We're bored!"

Sara clamped a hand over Harry's mouth, giggled and yelled "We'll be right out."

"What'd you do that for? I had a really good comeback."

Sara stood and helped him up, "Harry? Find the nicest pajamas you have and shut him up, will you?"

he found some and changed without taking his eyes off her as she slipped a pretty white silk nightgown over her head and brought a dark red robe around her shoulders.

When they re-emerged, Snape and Draco were looking bored and pretending to be interested in what they were discussing. They were in Sara's bedroom, which was really just a medium sized open space with a half-partition and a step down separating it from the parlor. (The rooms themselves, as well as the storage room across the hall were actually built on top of the roof itself, but turned down into the tower via the stone staircase at the end of the hall, once meant for house elves. The storage room set back against the edge of the roof, like the iris of a cartoon eye, leaving a huge crescent of rooftop on Sara's side.)

Draco laughed approvingly when he saw Harry. "Good choice, Potter. Now how about something Sara *didn't* pick out?"

"Cotton with an ugly print, I'm afraid."

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"How did I know." He smirked

They sat in the parlor for a half hour, talking and drinking heavily laced eggnog. Snape had played the Beatles and that seemed to be fine with everyone. A flock of owls flew in together, and one macaw, dropping gifts in front of the tree. Harry and Sara hurried over to look at them, declaring they were from Ron and Hermione.

"Harry, this one's for you." Sara said and handed him a package in Sirius' sloppy script. This he set aside. Harry picked up another, very small box and looked dumbfounded. He just sat there staring down at it, as if in consideration.

"What is it?" She asked.

"It's from the Dursleys."

"Just throw it away, then." She scowled. She'd heard from Ron that they sent him things like tissues, used socks, and coat hangers and called them gifts. "Give it to me, I'll go throw it off the roof." She held out her hand, but he tore the brown wrapping instead. There was a letter on top of the box and he picked this up, setting the rest aside. Sara settled back and waited to be angry, thinking up all the things she could say in a letter to his cursed Aunt and Uncle. Snape knew all the stories of course, and Draco was interested solely because Sara got so upset over it.

He read aloud.

Harry,

A few months after your parents died, we received this from a repairman in London. Your father had taken it in to be fixed but never picked it up. We'd forgotten all about it, but last week your Uncle found it in the attic. I thought you should have it.

Please do something about that repulsive owl of yours. It came here on Saturday and refused to leave.

Aunt Petunia

"It's something of my father's!" He told Sara and quickly had the box, pulling off the lid. "It's a gold watch." He said, smiling and taking it in his hands. "My father's watch."

She smiled, "Good thing I didn't throw it off the roof."

"There's something engraved on the back." His eyes were pained, but his expression warm as he brushed his thumb over the wording.

"Harry, what does it say?"

His voice was hushed when he finally spoke. "*To James on our first anniversary. Love Lily.*" He smiled at Sara, took the watch and left the room. No one went after him.

* * *

Harry lay asleep in Ron and Hermione's room, the watch on the nightstand where he would see it as soon as he opened his eyes. Sara was restless. She had never seen Harry so deeply emotional. He was terribly sad, but at the same time, couldn't be happier. It was an exhausting way to feel and Harry had been softly snoring when she'd come in. She lay there next to him in the dark, wide awake, and

thinking of Harry's new watch.

Silently she pulled a velvet cloak around her shoulders and crept from the room, shutting the door behind her as she made her way to her deserted bedroom. Sara found parchment, a quill, and a bottle of ink in the desk and sat down at the table to write, the raven watching her through the doors, unseen.

Dear Mrs. Dursley,

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I'm not sure why you decided to send Harry his father's watch, but I wanted to thank you. You have no idea what it means to him. He is asleep right now and does not know I'm writing to you, but if you could have seen his face you would understand why I am. Harry needs memories of his parents, he needs their mementos, things he can touch and know them by. However, he also needs acceptance from what little family he has left, whether he knows it or not.

I have to admit, I am confused by the way you spoke to him when we met. You despise him and I can't understand why. Yes, he is what he is, but if you knew Harry you would know he is the best of us all, kind, loyal and courageous. He is patient and understanding and the sort of friend that everyone wants to have. A truly wonderful person who is loved by many.

He is famous, did you know? A legend before he could walk and now he's also a hero. Harry has risked his life to save others in peril many times since he came to school here and has received countless special awards, not to mention the respect and admiration of our most beloved leaders. This September he saved the Headmaster's life as well, using a brilliant tactic that never would have occurred to others.

And you should see the athlete he is, holding the most coveted position on his house team, of which he is Captain, and has never been outshined. Did you know he was the youngest student appointed to his position in a hundred years? Or that he has received many offers from prestigious national league teams, all of which he turned down? I think there are probably a lot of things you don't know about Harry, but how would you? He would never brag, or even think you would care.

I honestly don't know how Harry feels about you, but he appreciated his father's watch more than words can express and for this you have my unending gratitude. To show my thanks and hopefully as a token of friendship, I have enclosed something for you, totally "unaltered" you have my word. After all, we're to be relatives someday.

Happy Christmas,

Sara Lemke

Sara enclosed a picture of Harry and herself at the Criterion, as well as a diamond necklace she didn't really care for and had never worn, still in its velvet box, and gave the letter to Hedwig, who took it hesitantly. "Don't worry, girl." She soothed and petted the bird's head, "Just put it through the mail slot. No personal delivery necessary. Thank you, Hedwig, I know you just got home from that dreadful place."

She poured a strong drink, hoping it would put her to sleep, got the pack of cigarettes she'd bought in London and carried them onto the roof, still under its warm, weather-repellent bubble. Hedwig rode on her shoulder and flew off when they reached the wall. Sara smoked and sipped her drink as she watched the snowy owl become smaller and smaller until she disappeared into the blackness completely, lost in thought about Harry and how Petunia would receive her letter.

She was thankful there was no one in her rooms. Severus had decided to stay, but they all had rooms in the lower part of the tower tonight. She was thankful for the privacy, glad to be alone while the castle slept, alone with her thoughts and a beautiful, clear night sky.

There was a tapping, like a pencil on stone and she whirled around to find the raven looking back at her from its perch in the shadows.

"You!" She hissed, angered at once by it. "You bear no letter, so what do you want? To spy on me while I get some air? Does this interest you?"

"Actually, yes."

Sara spun, startled and came face to face with Lucius, there on the roof outside her own door. She opened her mouth to scream, but his hand covered it before she could make a sound. She bit down hard on his leather glove and he pulled his arm back, releasing her.

"Get out of here! How dare you come here!"

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"I must confess," He smiled in that devilish way that always set her on edge, "I couldn't stop thinking of our little meeting this afternoon." Lucius grabbed her arm and pulled her across the roof and into the shadows at the back wall where even if someone came out the doors they still might not be seen. He locked his arm around her as he had at the pub, dropped his gloves to the floor, and ran his cold fingers along her cheek. "My *belladonna*," he whispered, "I wanted to see you. I meant no intrusion."

"Well it *is* an intrusion! Do you always just show up on people's roofs? Come to think of it, you probably do since your son also seems to have a problem with front doors. By the way, he's right inside. Perhaps you'd like to say happy Christmas?" She was infuriated by his presence, shaking in fear, but her comment reflected on his face for a fraction of a second, her sarcasm sharp and cutting.

"He's here with the others like me, orphaned by the menace you serve. He's here, Lucius, because he can't go home. Do you know how that makes me hate you?"

"Always thinking about Draco, are you? What about me? Do you really think I enjoy having my son away from home during the holidays? Especially now that his mother has left us? This rebelling stage he's going through weighs heavy on me as well."

"Oh, cut the crap, Lucius. Did you forget that you threatened to kill him just a few short hours ago? Is every word from your mouth nothing but glamour to cover your hateful lies and treachery? You would

kill your own son *over a girl!* That's the most *pathetic* thing I've ever heard."

His face became a mask of fury and he slammed her hard against the wall, holding her there while his other hand clamped over her mouth, his fingers biting into her skin, the pressure nearly unbearable. She whimpered under his palm, terrified.

"If you speak of my son again *I'll kill you.*" He seethed.

Suddenly he was flying backward, propelled by a short burst of lightning from Sara's hand, which she thrust hard into his chest. She stood over him where he landed, a smirk on her face, her black streak turned crimson. The roof gave a faint tremor, though she calmed herself instantly before it could wake anyone and the red slowly faded from her hair. "Mr. Malfoy, you *do* forget your manners."

"I meant what I said."

"Yes, and now that you've threatened to kill half of Hogwarts, am I supposed to take this seriously? I mean here you are at one in the morning on Christmas, on the roof of a God damned *school*, stalking a teenaged girl who not even a week ago was making out with your son. Does this make any sense to you? On top of that I'm practically engaged, I despise you, and I could easily kill you right now and call you a malicious prowler, which is exactly what you are. But I'll spare you this one time, for Draco, not because I care what becomes of you. Now get up, you look pitiful sitting there on the floor all scratched and tousled."

He stood gracefully and straightened his clothes. "There are easier and more interesting ways to be rid of me, Sara." He closed in again. She was near the wall, but refused to back up against it or to shrink from him.

So quick he was, like a cat, that she was caught off guard and found herself crashing hard against the stone under his weight, her wrists pinned beside her as he slid his fingers up to entwine hers as if they were casually holding hands. Sara realized too late that she'd been stripped of her only defense. She felt his breath on her neck and shuttered. The desire she'd felt in the pub came trickling back, tiptoeing gingerly up her spine and she felt herself being quickly overcome by it.. "You always resort to this." She sighed, "Holding me against my will and trying to soften my resolve with your frostbite kisses. Well it's not going to work."

When he pulled his fingers away she found her hands were bound to the wall with steel braces which he must have had hidden in his cloak. Sara felt panic begin to mix with desire, gazing from one hand to the other and half-heartedly testing the resistance of the cold metal. "*Bastard!*" She hissed at him,

"Am I supposed to find this endearing?"

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"Am I supposed to believe you're not enjoying yourself?" he smirked and undid the clasp on her velvet cape, letting it fall to the floor and leaving her standing there in her delicate white silk nightgown, unable to do anything but just that. Sliding his hands over the thin soft fabric, he gently kissed her, his lips a whisper on hers and he almost pulled away completely, then hesitated. The desire she felt was an electric frenzy and she fought it back, but knew she was rapidly losing what little remained of rationality. All she knew was the warmth of his hands, shaking ever so slightly, and the helpless desperation of having his lips so close to hers. She found the loss of control at the hands of her dark and beautiful enemy exciting and tried to hold on to the last thread of her fleeting resolve. Sara let her eyes close and tears leaked down her face. Once again his lips moved closer and she felt the need and the dread of what couldn't be stopped, a dissolution of the mental and the physical. She was powerless and cursed the predispositions of the Elemental, the worst weakness of all. Darkness.

"*Harry.*" She whispered.

Lucius grinned. She hadn't meant for him to hear, he knew, and decided instantly to use the moment to his advantage. He kissed her forcefully, her head hitting the stone wall. She was surprised, not expecting it, and returned the kiss passionately, succumbing to every desire she'd ever had regarding Lucius. Relinquishing completely.

The steel binds exploded from the wall under the force of lightning, clearing the roof and descending somewhere on the grounds and Lucius realized she could have freed herself at any time. Her arms went around him, pulling him closer, though he was already so close she could hardly breathe.

Suddenly, she pushed him away and spit on the floor in disgust. "Don't ever do that again." She warned, "You're not the only one with a good death threat up their sleeve."

He took a step toward her and she sent him back with a modest burst of lightning, drawn out of the air and directed by her outstretched hand. Enough to hurt, but not enough to take him off his feet again. She directed to his left, moving away from the wall so not to be fooled again and jolted him a second time. "Do you really want to play this game Lucius?" She asked, shaking and adrenalized, touching the Fortificus Charm, her other hand limp at her side. She paced casually before him, angered but strangely calm and uncommonly confident.

Lucius laughed in his sinister and all-knowing way, soft, harsh, but musical. She felt belittled, knowing what he implied and despised him even more.

"I don't play games." He said, his voice was soothing, placid, but with a menacing undertone Sara couldn't miss. "Come here."

"*Get off my roof!*" She hissed, fifteen feet from him, her back to the night sky. "Remember, Lucius, I can bring them all with one good scream. Leave now, *however* you got here!"

"By broom, of course, from Hogsmead." He grinned his malice, "I'll be going home once I leave here.

You have a port key. Use it."

"Go to hell, *Slytherin!* I'd rather die! What would I want with you when I have all I want already?"

"Yes, your little love interest, I believe I've made my feelings on that subject perfectly clear. Once

more and you'll be remembering *the boy who died*." He growled and stepped quickly toward her. Sara stood her ground. She'd been expecting his advance, pushing him toward it really, and raised her arms to the sky, stopping him dead in his tracks. She pushed her will into the night, bringing a swift and steady wind down around Lucius as he stood riveted to the spot and she spoke eloquently in old Romanian, which he didn't understand. The wind encircled him, whipping his hair about his head, his clothes flapping and rustling. His serpent-headed cane was ripped from his hand and cast out of the mini tornado, outside of which he could see a faint glimmer of her, coming closer. For perhaps the first time, Lucius found he was badly frightened, the wind a cyclone of terror and her advancing figure unearthly and surreal.

Sara stepped into the center of the tornado, unaffected as a ghost through a wall and stood before him, her long hair stirring gently around her shoulders, her eyes fierce and severe. She smiled at his vain attempts to hide his fear, holding his broom in her hand.

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"Lucius," She whispered in his ear, her voice drifting and angelic, like a feather on the breeze, "I never want to see you again."

She kissed the corner of his mouth quickly as she put the broom in his hands. "Never return here." She stepped back through the thick wall of swirling wind, again untouched by it and with a gesture threw him off the roof, the tornado around him dispersing back into the night.

Sara hurried into her rooms and closed the doors behind her, stopping to fall against them and catch her breath, doubly thankful Harry was sleeping in Ron and Hermione's room and that Severus wasn't in his favorite spot in front of the fire. She was alone, just as she wanted and needed to be. Her mother's voice softly filled the room as she went to pour herself a stiff drink, thought again, and got a bottle of Finnegan's Swill from the cabinet instead. She was shaking, totally unsettled and adrenaline pumped through her until she was dizzy. She dropped heavily into the chair by Harry's side of the bed, where she was well hidden from the glass doors and took a long drink, watching the lights dance on the Christmas tree, a roaring blaze in the fireplace warming her cold skin. She'd left her velvet cloak on the roof, but she wouldn't go back for it. She would go in the morning to recover it, in broad daylight.

She tipped the bottle again, furious that she was afraid once more to venture out her own door after dark and decided she preferred the threat of Voldemort to Lucius Malfoy. Voldemort, at least, was easier to deal with. Not so gorgeous and impeccable, or so irresistibly charming. She'd wanted in the worst way to surrender completely to his unexpected kiss, and had lost herself in it for a moment, but recovered her senses, thankfully. Harry had drifted into her thoughts, Harry and everything she loved about Harry. The very thought of him had given her the strength and all the motivation she'd needed. She sat in silence for awhile, drinking, listening to her mother sing so low and beautiful, so hauntingly. Occasionally she lifted a hand to wipe tears from her face but it was an hour before she moved.

It was to the couch that she went, loving the feel of the soft leather and the warmth of the fire. She was dazed, unsteady, but still held the bottle and sipped it as she lay there, thinking of Harry and her hatred of Lucius and dreaming of all the things she should have said. Eventually she drifted off, the bottle slipping from her grip and crashing to the marble, spilling its contents, rolling dangerously close to the flames.

* * *

"Sara!" Harry shook her again, "*Sara! SARA!!*" His brow furrowed as she stirred only a little and Harry looked toward the hallway over his shoulder. "PROFESSOR!! MALFOY! **SOMEONE GET SNAPE!!**"

As he waited, Harry noticed small smudges on either side of her face, which upon closer inspection, turned out to be curious bruises. He studied them for a moment, then stretched his hand over her mouth, the marks coinciding almost perfectly with his thumb and middle finger. There were bruises on her upper arm as well, as if someone had gripped her there hard. He found the back of each of her hands was a little scraped and there were second degree burns on the one hanging off the sofa. Harry didn't get to investigate further because Snape came running into the room with Draco, Neville, and Brittany on his heels. It was barely dawn, and all wore tired faces.

Snape stopped short and almost caused a pile-up behind him, his jaw dropping at the charred ruins of the coffee table and the little throw rug was also burned. The marble was tarnished in a wide pool of soot and ash.

"*What happened?*" He demanded as he rushed to bend over Sara, asleep on the couch, her white nightgown dusted with soot as well. Harry held up the blackened remains of a liquor bottle and Snape gave a brief nod. "Draco, go to the chest by the bed and bring me the sobering potion and the hangover potion as well. Brittany, Longbottom, go to the hospital wing and get a burn salve and some bandages." They nodded and ran from the room in their pajamas and barefoot.

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"*This girl, Potter,*" Snape sighed as he covered her with a blanket, "is going to drive me totally insane."

Harry sighed as well, resigned. "That makes two of us."

Draco was there, handing the pretty stoppered jars to Snape and regarding Sara with worried eyes. "Is she alright, Professor?"

"Yes, Draco. She's just drunk. And nearly set herself on fire. I wonder how she managed to put this fire out in her state?"

"I don't think she did." Harry said and pointed at a charred lump on the floor near the edge of the

damage. Draco poked at it.

"What is it?" He asked.

"A tea towel."

* * *

Sara said that Christmas depressed her and that's why she'd been drinking again. Harry made it silently clear he did not believe her, but she neither apologized nor offered any other explanation. Snape was the caring father-figure, smiling sympathetically at her as he bandaged her burn. Draco paced in the background, occasionally stopping to gaze down at her, looking flustered and on edge. "Where did those bruises come from?" Harry demanded, "Who did that to you?"

"I...I must have fallen."

As Draco went onto the roof, Harry glowered at her, knowing she was lying, knowing someone had attacked her, after all the marks were a testament to that. Why wouldn't she tell him? He thought she trusted him with anything! He held her guilty, downcast eyes in silence, then abruptly stormed out of the room. "I'm getting dressed," he mumbled.

Snape finished wrapping Sara's hand and wrist as Draco returned with her velvet cloak folded over his arm. He came to stand over her and their eyes connected. He was furious and she grew worried.

Severus, wanting them to have privacy, quickly left the room.

"You seem to have dropped this," Draco said, "Right next to the war zone." Her eyes grew wide and he continued. "Don't worry, I cleaned it up. And of course I'll hide this." He pulled the cloak aside just enough for her to see he held the snake headed cane, snapped in two. "Nothing a little *reparo* won't fix. But Sara, I won't keep this secret forever. I refuse to be a silent witness to your eventual demise. You need to go tell Potter what happened. He knows you're lying anyway, just in case you missed that."

"I didn't miss it," She said and grew distraught again. "But I can't tell him this. Not *today*."

"Fine," He said, "Understandable even, but you'll tell him soon or I'm afraid I'll have to betray your trust."

She looked up sharply, "You wouldn't!"

"Only if you leave me with no choice. Sara, I don't want to see anything happen to you and right now you're obviously making the wrong decisions. Now I've got to hide this." He walked quickly out of the room without waiting for her response.

Snape took his cue as Draco passed through the hall and hurried back to the blistered sofa, leaning over to survey its damage, running a hand over the ruined leather. "Well, this will need replacing. And you'll need a new table, but I'm sure I can find one in the storage room for you."

"No, Harry will get it later. Don't trouble yourself," She smiled sweetly at him as he fixed her blanket and poured her another glass of water. "Severus? Do you think there's something wrong with me? I know that's a strange question, it's just that I don't know why I act as I do. I don't mean to."

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He stopped rearranging the blanket and sat by her knees, facing her. He laid a hand over hers and patted it gently. "You have a lot on your mind, my dear. You're troubled. There's nothing wrong with you. All you need is a constructive way to deal with your emotions." He struggled a little and his awkward discomfort showed on his face, making her smile adoringly at him. The sarcasm leaked back into his voice. "*Incinerating yourself* isn't going to solve anything."

"Now *there's* the Severus I know and love!" She grinned, "I thought you were turning into a high school guidance counselor for a moment there."

He smiled and stood, relieved that she'd lightened the conversation.

"Help me up," She said, "It's Christmas morning and we have gifts to open. I just need to freshen up a little."

* * *

Harry grabbed Draco's arm and spun him around. "What are you doing? Why are you taking Sara's cloak into your room?" He was angry and looking at Draco with suspicion. "What are you hiding?"

"Shove off, *Potter*," Draco sneered and glanced deliberately at Harry's hand, clutching him hard just above the elbow. "I was going to return this on my way back, now get off!" He ripped his arm from Harry's grip and stepped back.

"Did you leave those marks on her, Malfoy? Because if you *did*-"

"I did no such thing!" Draco yelled, "You're half out of your mind!"

"If you laid a hand on her you'll regret it, *Draco*, I swear to you will."

"I didn't do *anything*! What the hell is wrong with you? You're acting like a maniac and it's really unbecoming."

In a flash Harry grabbed the cloak and whisked it away, leaving Draco standing there holding the sinister snake-headed cane and thinking things had just taken a very bad turn.

Harry was stunned for a moment, trying to make sense of the highly recognizable and broken object in Draco's hand. "Explain *that*, then."

"Well, I um..." He fumbled.

Harry lunged and plowed him into the wall, the cane tumbling to the floor as Draco tried to defend himself, shoving Harry back, not knowing if he should punch him or try to calm him down. The answer came when Harry's fist connected with his lower jaw.

Tumbling to the floor, Draco hardly heard Harry's bellowing threats and promises, he fought back as he'd been taught and knew he should be winning, but Harry's blind fury somehow gave him the advantage and Draco was taking a beating.

Suddenly chaos and noise surrounded them, though they were oblivious to it and Sara was there, pulling Harry away and pleading with him to stop. Draco felt strong hands reach under his arms and drag him out of Potter's reach.

Draco's heart was pounding and blood leaked from his lip as he watched Sara fall to the floor and wrap both arms around Harry to hold him back. "Harry *stop it!*" She pleaded. "It's not his fault!" "Stop trying to protect him!" Harry yelled, "We're the only one's here, Sara, *who else could it be?*" And there he is sneaking off with *that* under your cloak!" He pointed adamantly at the cane on the floor by the wall.

"I asked him to hide it, okay? He didn't do anything wrong and you're *beating him up!*"

"I hardly think so!" Draco was indignant, "Malfoys don't get '*beat up*' by the likes of *Harry Potter!*"

"I'd be glad to finish the job, snake. Just say the word."

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Snape growled at Harry over his shoulder as he examined a cut on Draco's forehead. "That's *enough* out of you, *Potter!*" He turned his eyes to Sara, "Although I *would* like to know how Lucius Malfoy's belongings came to be here and you never did explain those bruises."

Neville and Brittany stood off to the side and Sara sighed, all eyes were on her and they were impatient. "I couldn't sleep, so I went out on the roof and he was waiting. He covered my mouth so I wouldn't scream, but I struggled and he grabbed my arm and demanded to see Draco, but I told him to leave." She took a deep breath, then continued, "He tried to scare me I guess, but I managed to get rid of him with a little lightning and a rather intimidating wind charm I know. It's really not a big deal, I handled the problem and no one would have even known if I hadn't set the bedroom on fire." She did her best to appear vindicated, yet embarrassed and thought she'd done a decent job of it. "it's why he wanted to talk to me yesterday. He wanted me to deliver a message and Draco chose to ignore it. It's over now, okay? Lucius won't be back anytime soon, I assure you."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Harry asked and his eyes looked hurt, "Sara, why would you lie about that?"

"Because it's Christmas and I didn't want to spoil it anymore than I already have. Also, I didn't want to make Draco feel any worse than he already does. Now let's just forget this whole morning and switch gears. Come on everyone, there're presents under the tree and a big breakfast to follow."

"I'll have to speak to the Headmaster about this as soon as possible." Snape noted aloud.

Sara snapped her eyes in his direction. "No! Severus, just drop it, okay? No harm was done. Like I said he won't be back. I did, after all, manage to scare the hell out of him. Besides, he wasn't trying to come in or anything. He never even *asked* to. There's nothing to report."

"I'll have to think about this." Snape said and helped Draco to his feet.

"We'll talk later." Sara said and grabbed Harry's hand. "Come on Harry."

At this the group dispersed in different directions, Draco stopping to collect the cane before opening his door. Harry put an arm around Sara, for even with the potions Snape had given her, she still didn't feel well and her burn was hurting a little. She leaned on him as they walked.

"I'm sorry." She whispered and went through the door, "I should have told you everything."

His tone was soft and forgiving. "You're a terrible liar, you know. And you're still holding something back. I wish I knew what it was." He turned and took her face in his hands, "Do you know how I'd feel if something happened to you?"

She looked shamefully up at him. "I'm fine, though. I told you I can take care of myself if needs be. Don't worry so much, Harry. And thanks for sticking up for me. You went about it the wrong way I think, but it's still sweet of you."

He gave her a brief kiss and smiled, wincing a bit from his bruises. "Pick something out. I'll help you change."

"Are you sure? It's a horribly unpleasant task." She grinned as she opened drawers, grabbing something here and there, ever mindful of her bandaged hand.

"I could always ask Malfoy if you'd prefer. He's right down the hall, I could go get him."

"Thanks, but I don't want to wait. I guess you'll have to do."

Harry smiled, then grew serious. "How's your hand?"

"It's not bad."

"Sara, what if your hair had caught fire? Or your clothes? What if the whole sofa had gone up in flames with you in it?"

"Then I would regret getting drunk even more than I do now. It didn't happen, Harry, don't dwell on it. It does no good."

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"Don't dwell on it? Are you serious? You saw the front of the sofa, Sara, the fire came within inches! Your hand is burned! You could be dead right now, on Christmas morning no less, and you think I can just forget about it? Pretend it didn't happen?"

"Of course not. All I meant was don't let it drive you crazy. I promise you with all my heart, I'll never pass out in front of open flames again."

He held open a simple red silk dress and she pushed her arms through the sleeves, then he set to buttoning it for her. "Oh, sorry. I guess I'm more accustomed to *undressing* you."

Sara giggled. "You're doing just fine. In fact, I kind of like having you dress me. I think you should do it more often." She smiled at him, down on one knee, working the dozens of little buttons.

Harry raised his eyebrows at the invitation and grinned. "Anytime."

Once again someone was pounding on the door and Harry called out to the person on the other side.

"We'll be right there!" he said and stood, all done with the buttons. "Sara, let's fly to the cottage after breakfast. We'll send an owl later and spend the night there, without Snape, without having to be back by sundown. Just the two of us, what do you say?"

"It sounds wonderful, but I shouldn't make Uncle Albus worry on Christmas, especially after setting the school on fire. We'll be alone tonight, I promise. Is it so bad that it's here?"

"It was just a thought, but you're right, of course." He guided her to the vanity and helped her onto the stool. Without a word he brushed her hair, still mostly black on one side, pulling it gently back from her face and loving the silky feel of it against his hands. "Sara I can't wait to graduate. To be on our own and able to do as we please. And if you want, you can be my Mrs. Potter and we'll live together in a big house on top of a cliff and every night we'll sleep to the sound of the ocean waves crashing on the rocks." He smiled as he smoothed her long tresses, then twirled the soft ringlets near her waist around his fingers. He stepped briefly away, then draped a black silk cape around her shoulders, reaching around her to tie the ribbon, resting his head affectionately against hers and landing a few soft, random kisses as he worked.

"I can't wait, either. Imagine, to be totally free! I have lived long enough as a caged bird and Gypsies always tire of the same old scenery. I have the wanderlust of my father's ancestors in my blood, you know. And I can't wait for us to live together, Harry, and someday I *will* be your Mrs. Potter. Our palms have told us as much, but I feel it in my heart, too. Unless, of course, I fall out of favor and you fall in love with Ginny Weasley or one of the Queens of Mabelline."

Harry faltered at the mention of Ginny and Sara found it curious, but she said nothing. She took his proffered hand and let him lead her into the main rooms to join the others.

* * *

They had set a limit on how much money they would spend on gifts (mostly to keep Sara and from overspending and Malfoy from overcompensating for lack of sincerity) and had also agreed on only one gift per person (again to restrain Sara). As a result, Sara got Harry a Muggle Music Player, which he was crazy about, of course, and Malfoy gave him a bunch of music for it. Ironically, and at Sara's suggestion, that's exactly what Harry got for Malfoy. Harry and Draco weren't speaking to each other, but the exchange was impersonal, adequate, and relatively painless. They each said an awkward *thank you* and moved on to their other packages.

Sara opened Harry's small gift with mounting curiosity, intrigued by the long, flat box with one heavy item that moved inside when she shook it. Quickly she unwrapped it and opened the black velvet lid. It was an unusual, beautiful gold medallion on a long gold chain. The metalwork was elegant and even more intricate than the Fortificus Charm. It looked like a watch dial, but upon closer inspection, she saw the hands, black, lavender, blue and silver, had little initials on them and the faceplate was lined with words such as *home, work, traveling, mortal peril, shopping, on holiday, out drinking, and snogging*, among others. "Harry this is *great!*" She beamed, "Right now it says Ron is *on holiday* and Hermione, you and I are *home*."

Malfoy wrinkled his brow, "Not fair! You way overspent, Potter!"

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Everyone looked at Harry. "Ron and I ordered these *months* ago. We both have one and he gave one to Hermione today, too." He turned to speak directly to Sara, "We got the idea from the one they have at the Burrow. It looks like a grandfather clock. It's really cool."

"Thanks, Harry." She hugged him, mirroring his discomfort at being watched by the room. "I'll have to write to Ron later and thank him, too, since he had a hand in."

"I'm sure he'd love that. And by the way, *snogging* was his idea."

"I thought so." She laughed, "Now what's left?"

Brittany was still camped out on the floor, opening the dozens of gifts she'd gotten from Sara. Harry and Neville had gotten her several things as well and even Draco had overspent a little. (Snape's gift of a nice student's potions set was obvious) Harry watched her, thinking of himself at that age and thinking the little orphaned girl was probably beside herself with joy. Sara had practically given her a new wardrobe and Sara's fine taste and impeccable style were enough to please anyone. Brittany was no exception and her delight was more evident with every new outfit. Eventually, she finished unwrapping and Sara was sitting with her, looking at everything and picking something out to wear for breakfast.

"Sara?" Harry stood, "There's something I want to do before breakfast so if you don't mind I think I'll head down now."

"Is everything ok?"

"Yes, I just want to deliver one last present."

* * *

That night Harry and Sara locked themselves in the tower after a long day of festivity. They'd had an impromptu Quidditch match without bludgers. Draco, Snape, and Brittany wore green and silver Slytherin robes and Harry, Sara, and Neville dressed in Gryffindor scarlet and gold. Brittany and Neville, who was a flying disaster, played keeper to one hoop only. Sara and Snape, both of average talent, were chasers. Harry and Draco, of course, were seekers.

Dumbledore watched from the center top-box, often clapping his hands or laughing out loud, running the score keeper and calling the tally over the loudspeaker, leaving out the narrative. *Slytherin ninety points!* Occasionally he'd even compliment someone's play.

The game was almost a washout. Neville managed to block only two shots from Snape, and allowed him to score 110 points, while Sara hadn't gotten past Brittany once and often caught her attempts and

raced back down the field with the quaffle. If it wasn't for Harry catching the snitch, Slytherin might have beaten Gryffindor for the first time. As it is, Harry always comes through in the end.

Harry had been impressed with Brittany's skill and offered to teach her a thing or two the next day. She'd agreed with enthusiasm and walked with him all the way back to the castle, the two of them chatting animatedly about Quidditch.

They'd both had a stash of extra Christmas presents for each other hidden in various places in the tower and had a great time opening them on the floor before the tree. Sara wore a black silk nightgown with thin little straps and elegant embroidery (which Harry had always thought looked just like a woman's half-slip), a crushed velvet cape tied across her shoulders pooled around her, pushed back on one side, revealing the shining gold serpent on her arm.

"That snake thing really is pretty." Harry said, "No wonder it caught your eye."

Sara laughed, "You're terrible, you know, charming it to bite Malfoy. It was kind of funny, though."

"I didn't charm the serpent to bite Malfoy. That's the thing, Sara. It's been bothering me since it happened."

"What do you mean?"

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"I charmed it to attack anyone who would do you harm."

"But it struck out at Draco!"

"I know." He hesitated, "Watch yourself around him, Sara. He's on his best behavior whenever you're around. You don't know how he really is. He can only be trusted in slices, not on the whole."

Sara was silent for a moment, absorbing this new information.

"Come with me." Harry stood and helped her up, "There's someone I want you to see."

Harry led her down into the rooms below. He knocked lightly and the door was opened by one of the house elves, who smiled up at Harry and invited them in.

There were several of them in the room, Sara soon saw, and one was nestled in the big bed with a heavily bandaged arm resting on the coverlet. One of Harry's white cotton tee-shirts lay over his thin form and she thought he looked lost in it. The injured elf smiled brightly and his eyes lit up at the sight of Harry.

"Sara, you remember Dobby."

"Of course!" She said and quickly sat on the edge of the bed. "It was you, wasn't it? You put out the fire! I remember seeing you last night, but I couldn't wake up. You were crying."

"He was trying to clean up the spill when it ignited." Harry continued.

"You were burned! Your arm!" Sara looked horrified and took Dobby's tiny hand in hers and held it.

"Here's your hero, Sara." Harry smiled, "He made sure you were safe before he went for help with his injury."

"Thank you, Dobby." She leaned forward and kissed his forehead, "And I'm sorry my foolishness got you hurt."

"It's ok." Dobby smiled, "Dobby is fine now that Harry Potter has given him this room for getting better."

"If you don't mind me asking, how did you come to be there at such an advantageous time?"

"Bringing Harry Potter his Christmas present of course!"

Sara laughed. "You did very well, Dobby. Thank you again. If you need anything just let me know."

She stood and took Harry's hand. "We'll check on you in the morning. Please, stay as long as you like." She smiled lovingly at the pale little elf and followed Harry into the hall where she fell against the stone and sighed.

"Harry, that poor creature. What did I do?"

"He'll be alright, Sara." He reassured her, "Besides, he likes you, I could tell. Now come on." He took her hand, "Let's go to bed."

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16. Belladonna

The bitter winter weeks crept by until the ground lost its blanket of white, muddied, then again became the brilliant green of spring. Exams came and went with excellent results (some better than others, of course) Gryffindor once again held the Quidditch Cup, but the win was well earned. The Slytherins fought hard, Malfoy especially, and the game was close, but Harry caught the snitch in a photo finish to deny Draco his last chance at victory.

Thanks mostly to Hermione, and with help from Dumbledore, the spell they required to bind their books was complete. Hermione claimed to be finished writing hers, but was always going back to add afterthoughts. Sara and Harry were also finished for the most part, just had some last bits of editing and polishing. Ron's book was near its close, and was surprisingly the thickest of all. It looked as though all would be ready on schedule.

Ginny Weasley had grown quiet and avoided her brother's friends as much as possible. When they were together, she refused to look at Harry and snubbed him with one word answers when he tried to talk to her. Sara she tolerated by ignoring her completely. Everyone had tried to talk to Ginny, but only Harry knew why she acted as she did. Lately, Ginny had been spending time with Justin Finch-Fletchley and it was rumored that the two of them were dating.

As June rolled around, Ron and Hermione celebrated the lease of their new London flat and Sara gave them a living room set as an early house-warming gift. Ron had been accepted for training through the Wizard Defense League and Hermione was hired by the Ministry of Magic's Records and Research Department as a fact checker. She still claimed to have no idea what she wanted to train for.

Harry planned to look for a job once they were settled and wasn't sure if he was pleased or disappointed to learn that wizard gold could easily be exchanged for muggle money at Gringott's Bank. Now it didn't matter what he did for a living and the plethora of choices left him confused and overwhelmed. He thought about signing up for Auror training as he'd once planned, but Dumbledore wouldn't hear of it. He insisted Harry wait to commit to anything until they'd discussed it fully. So far, Harry hadn't come up with anything to discuss.

As for Draco, he fell into a boring routine of class work, studying, and Quidditch that left him little time to visit the tower and he saw Sara rarely. He often wondered how she was doing, the black half of her hair having retreated very few times, only to reclaim the vacated blonde within days. He asked her whenever he got a chance about his father and he knew she lied about the severity of it.

He'd developed a correspondence with his father over the months and had reconciled a bit, though reluctantly. Draco hadn't forgotten the death of his mother, being imprisoned in his own home, or the threat on his life Sara had been given. Draco loathed his father for what he was doing to Sara as well. Lucius cared little for Sara, though he showed her patience and a leniency Draco had never seen before. His father surely had feelings for her, but not love. Never love. Not for people, not even his own son.

Draco no longer feared for himself and planned to visit Malfoy Manor for dinner on Saturday when the Hogwarts Express returned to London. He had rented a large house in the gothic style overlooking the city and planned to spend most of his time there reading, listening to music, or otherwise keeping to himself. He would venture out to shop, of course, he was forever in need of fine clothes. Then he would wear them as he wandered the city, eating in different restaurants, drinking in various clubs and trying to pick up muggle girls at The Phantom, his favorite haunt. Going to museums and muggle movies, all the things he'd missed before. As a family, the Malfoys rarely ventured out of the wizarding world.

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He was nervous about seeing his father in only two short days, but he needed to do something about Sara. Once she left Hogwarts she would lose her protection. Sure she would have Harry, but even Hero Boy couldn't watch over her every moment of the day and Lucius would soon tire of letters and the whole cat and mouse game. It was wearing Sara down, he could see it in her face when they spoke about it. She wasn't sleeping, make-up inadequately concealed dark circles under her eyes, which were distant and troubled. He watched her pick at her food from across the Great Hall and she seemed to be in deep thought at all times. Clothes that once fit her precisely now clung to a thinner frame and even Harry seemed concerned. Potter treated her like something delicate and fragile. Something easily broken. He leapt to his feet after every meal to help her out of her chair, as if she were ill. Even tonight at the End of Year Feast, Draco had noticed Potter staring with a dreadful expression at the black in Sara's hair, which went clear around to the back of her head and was rather frightening if you knew what it meant.

It was last Saturday night, almost a week ago, that he had decided to meet with his father. He'd snuck out of the Slytherin common room for one last trip to Hogsmead. He tired early and left the Three Broomsticks after only two butterbeers and crept silently back through the castle. Music drifted through the corridors as he'd neared the Great Hall and he'd hidden himself behind a stone pillar and watched her.

She sat at the piano in the light of a single candle, dressed completely in black, her cape brushed back over her shoulders and a golden serpent gleaming brilliantly around her arm as she sang a song so morose it had him feeling wretched and desperate before he could even make out the words. He'd felt tears well up in his eyes as he listened and felt a pain so maddening and so complete he'd wanted to run from the hall, but the emotions were foreign, drifting in through his ears and he knew they were hers and that this way the way that she felt. Just as he thought his heart was breaking, that he would succumb completely to this misery, her fingers faltered, and her voice broke into dreadful, disturbing sobs. Her elbows crashed down on the keys as her head fell into her hands, sending a startling blast of discord echoing through the hall.

Draco hadn't slept that night. Back in his room he'd paced the floor until he'd made two decisions. One, he would agree to his father's dinner offer and two, he would send Harry a letter as soon as he left King's Cross.

* * *

On the second to last day of school, Sara headed down to Snape's lab after dinner and found him standing over a large cauldron of bubbling goo. He smiled when she came in and abandoned his station. The Slytherins had lost the House Cup to Gryffindor no more than an hour before, but he showed no sign of defeat. He was humming and in a splendid mood.

"Hello, my dear."

"Hello, Severus. Is the antidote ready?"

He handed her two small stoppered bottles. The larger one is the antidote."

"Thanks so much, Sevvie. I can't wait to get started on my experiment!" Her smile was a welcome sight and he wanted to make it last.

He wrinkled his brow in mock anger. "If you ever call me that again, I'll slip liquid fire into your hangover potion."

She slipped the bottles into her pockets, remembering when she'd asked for them a week before. *For an experiment*, she'd said, *to see if I can prove a point*. He'd accepted her lacking explanation readily and without doubt. Now she had them and her expression turned serious. "Severus," she asked, "why

are you so good to me?"

"I'm not sure." He admitted, going back to give his cauldron a quick stir with a thin wooden paddle.

"Perhaps I miss the company of your mother. I see so much of her in you."

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Her voice fell to a whisper. "Is that why you push me toward Draco? Because you were like him once?"

Another lost soul teetering on the edge of darkness, watching the girl he loves go off with someone else?"

"The boy is crazy about you, Sara. It saddens me to see him pushed aside in favor of..."

"In favor of what? Integrity and morals?"

"So maybe I do see certain similarities in Draco's adolescent life and my own. I know how it feels to be so sincere, yet held at arms length and eventually disregarded completely. Sara, I've spent my whole life wishing I'd done things differently. Now that she's gone..."

He turned away and lowered his head. She knew he wasn't crying, but anguished and she laid a hand on his arm, having never heard him speak so openly. "You can change nothing," she told him gently. "Just be thankful for the memories you have of her, the friendship she gave you. Severus, you have to be able to look back and smile whenever you think of her. We all make choices and I know you don't want to hear this, but my mother and father loved each other very much. She was happy and that should be all that matters. Especially now that she's gone." Tears leaked from her eyes and she wiped them away.

He put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I didn't mean to upset you. I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault." She said and sniffled, "I'm a walking time bomb already. There's another reason why I'm here. I need to talk to you."

25 minutes later Snape sat with her crying against his shoulder, his eyes serious, his expression worried. His arm was around her, his hand patting her back as if she were a small child. Finally, she calmed and pulled away.

"Sara, you should be telling all this to the Headmaster. He shouldn't be blindsided, you're his niece after all."

She knew he would say that. She couldn't explain herself fully and had made no mention of Lucius or the raven although she'd many times wanted to break down and confess everything during the course of the conversation, but in the end had kept her secret. "I can't tell him. He's the only person alive who could talk me out of it and you know he'll try."

"Then at least explain yourself to Potter. He'll most certainly be *affected* when he finds out, I'm sure."

"If I say anything to him, anything at all, I won't be able to go through with it. I can already see the look on his face. I know it's horrible. I've even tried writing it all down, but there's too much to say and nowhere to begin. I can't let it hinder me, Severus. I can't let *anyone* fracture my already fragile resolve. It will have to be after the fact."

"It's your decision. Do what you have to do then. But I want you to know that I think you should reconsider. There are always alternatives."

"I'm sorry, but I've considered them all. I have to do this."

He hung his head for a moment, searching for a way to dissuade her. Finally, he nodded in understanding.

"There's one more thing I want to ask of you."

"Of course. Anything."

"Let me into the Slytherin common room."

* * *

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Harry shared a table with Ron, Hermione, and Seamus, who wouldn't stop talking about their booming rum sales. The common room was warm, the windows open to the evening breeze. Seamus was figuring an invoice. The others were going over their spellbooks one last time, making last minute changes. They were to do the binding at nine o'clock in the Headmaster's office, with Dumbledore supervising.

Hermione had found a bit of information in the Restricted Section about how a powerful magical object could be used to channel and strengthen the spell as it was cast and Dumbledore said that having the Orb of Arassel at their disposal was nothing short of idyllic.

The four of them had practiced the spell many times with pointed fingers and schoolbooks, just so there were no mishaps. And they'd all had to come up with a key-word, a secret password to lock the spell and in order to use the books all four words would be required to activate them. Hermione had written these keys on a scroll to be hidden in the school by Dumbledore. Only the five of them would know where they were.

"Harry," Ron queried, "It's twenty of nine! Where's Sara?"

Hermione sighed. "She's *always* running late it seems. And she doesn't look so good, Harry. Maybe she should see Madam Pomfrey before you leave tomorrow. All those potions Snape gives her don't seem to be helping much."

"Really," Ron agreed, "We're starting to get a little worried. Everyone asks if she's sick and we don't know what to tell them."

Harry sighed, glad to finally talk about it. "I don't really know what's wrong with her. It started around Christmas. We were in London. I woke up one morning and the black streak was back behind her ear and came almost to the very front. She seemed to get better after that. The sadness went away, she seemed almost normal most of the time."

"Most of the time?" Hermione asked.

"There are times when I find her staring off in thought so deep that she doesn't hear me enter and when I speak it scares her half to death. She tosses and turns in her sleep. She has terrible nightmares. Once I even caught her yelling at a harmless blackbird, who'd made the mistake of perching on the rail. Several times I've found her standing on the roof in the middle of the night, holding a little box and crying. Having some kind of inner struggle."

Ron looked to him, concerned. "What was the box?"

"I don't know, she always put it in her pocket and changed the subject if I tried to ask. She's hiding something from me, it couldn't be more obvious, but I don't know what to do about it. She has a right to her privacy. And I can tell she thinks she's protecting me, but from what I don't know. Whatever it is, it's big and it's eating her alive."

Hermione appeared flustered. "*Make her tell you!*"

"I can't. Every time I try it ends with her storming off in frustration and I always find her passed out somewhere hours later. Usually on the floor of the roof or near the bed, as if she tried to get there but didn't make it. Last Saturday I found her sound asleep at the piano down in the Great Hall and had to carry her back to the tower under my cloak."

"Harry, you've got to tell Dumbledore."

"He's asking *me* about it."

* * *

Draco was surprised to hear a soft knock at his door. He wasn't sure if he should answer it, figuring it was probably another practical joke and took so long deciding the knock came again, but it was more insistent and there was authority behind it. He recognized it at once. It was Snape.

"Draco? Are you there?" Snape called through the heavy oak.

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"Come in, Professor." He called after a quick flick of his wand to undo the locks.

Snape pushed it open, then stood aside and Draco was shocked when Sara strolled in, looking beautiful even in disarray. Her hair was parted on the side, so that blonde laid over black and it helped, but the weariness on her face was disquieting.

He set aside his well-worn copy of *Faust* and straightened up from the pillows. He wanted to smile and welcome her, but he was caught off guard and all he could think of to say was "I should get dressed."

"Don't bother," she smiled, "We've all seen each other's pajamas."

"I'll be right outside." Snape said and closed the door, stepping into the hall.

Sara climbed onto Draco's bed and got under the covers, resting her head on the pillow and staring up at the ceiling. Draco was more than surprised by this and hesitated before sliding back down to lay beside her. She found his hand under the sheets and held it fast.

"Sara, what's wrong?"

"Don't ask questions." Her voice was soft and sorrowful. Her manner melancholy and tinged with finality. "It's not why I'm here."

"Then why are you here? I mean, not that I mind."

"I asked Severus to bring me because I wanted to see you. We kind of drifted apart after Christmas."

She hesitated, wondering how to say what she needed to say. "I never thanked you for being my friend these many months. I don't know what I would have done without you."

Draco scoffed, "Some friend I am. All I've done is place you in danger and allow you to stay there. If it wasn't for me, you and Potter would be halfway to the chapel by now. As it is, your hair turned black and you don't eat anymore. And you're keeping secrets from him. From *everyone*. Sometimes even from me."

"Don't blame yourself, Malfoy. I certainly don't hold you responsible for Lucius' actions."

He rolled onto his side and smiled at her. "So, I've finally got you in my bed." The humor he tried to put behind his words fell to depression. He knew this might be the last time they ever spent together and the thought left him in despair. "Stay with me, Sara. Snape won't say anything. I don't care if all we do is sleep. You've got the rest of your life to spend with Potter."

"We *will* see each other again, you know. The Orb told me so, and when I touched your hand I saw you older, your hair was longer, and you're looking at me." *With hatred, she thought, and rage.*

He smiled and squeezed her hand. "Will you stay?"

"I can't. You know I can't." Her voice broke softly as she fought back the tears that threatened. "Now say goodbye to me, Draco. It will be a long time before we meet again." She slid gracefully out of the bed and he met her in the middle of the room. She fell quiet for a moment, "I just wanted these last few minutes with you before tomorrow comes."

"Sara, it's graduation, not *doomsday*. Cheer up, you're going to make me get all sappy and betray my cool exterior."

"It's just that you may never look on me the same way again." Silent tears coursed down her face and she wiped them away quickly. "Don't ask me to explain, just know that I love you, Draco, for the friend you've been, and I'll always remember you as you are at this moment in time. No matter what becomes of us."

He held her eyes for a moment. *She knows something*, he thought, *whatever the Orb told her, it wasn't good.*

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He threw his arms around her and she pressed her head against his shoulder, fighting back tears that

leaked from her eyes. She wanted to tell him how sorry she was, to tell him *everything* and cry a river on his shoulder, but she knew she couldn't do that. She felt his cheek brush against her hair and he whispered with a hushed and anguished voice. "I love you, Sara." He said, "I always will." She kissed him and stepped back, smiling and in misery. She pulled a small pendant from her pocket on a glittering gold chain and put it in his hand. He held it up and stared curiously at a thin, emeraldcut diamond, flat and beveled on both sides and edged with elaborate, and probably ancient, gold metalwork. A red, swirling, liquid smoke curled within it. "It's exquisite." He said as he studied it. "It must be a thousand years old."

"It's an Amidon." She explained, "Inside it is the essence of my friendship. My love and affection, I guess. It's everything I feel about you. The day I no longer care, it will turn black and slowly fade, but until then, it will bring you reassurance."

"Thank you." He said, trying to smile, "It's already my most treasured possession."

She took the chain and clasped it around his neck. Smiling, she slipped the Amidon under his pajama top. "Keep it close to you." She whispered, kissed his cheek, and hurried out the door without looking back, leaving him standing there, feeling as if all the warmth in the world had just left his life for good.

* * *

"Sorry I'm late." Sara said as she entered the Gryffindor common room, "If we hurry, we can still make it on time."

Ron, Harry, and Hermione grabbed their books and the four of them left together, walking briskly down the halls to Dumbledore's office. No one asked her why she was late. They'd stopped asking Sara such questions months ago, they never got real answers anyway, just vague responses or a swift change of subject.

Dumbledore was waiting for them when they arrived, precisely on time, and he welcomed them in. They were not alone. Professor McGonagall sat quietly in a chair against the wall next to Snape, who gazed thoughtfully at Sara and regarded Harry as if in pity. Ron and Hermione narrowed their eyes at Snape and Ron balled his fists. "I thought we were going to be *alone!*"

Snape raised his lip in a sneer.

Ron turned to McGonagall. "Oh, hello Professor! I didn't see you there. I'm glad you could join us."

"Thank you, Ronald." She said, a demure grin curling her thin lips.

Dumbledore was also hiding a smile as Snape silently sulked, arms crossed against his chest. "Come, let's begin." The Headmaster said, wearing formal wizard robes of sapphire blue velvet and a grand pointed hat adorned with celestial moons and stars. The others had dressed to correspond with the color of their book, as was required by the accompanying spell, which was the base that they had built upon and embellished to suit their needs.

They had all dressed in formal wizard robes complete with the traditional pointed hat, but no one's was as tall or as pointed as Dumbledore's. Sara wore varying shades of purple, Ron wore blue and Hermione silver. Harry was dressed in black from head to toe and Sara thought he'd never looked so good.

They gathered around a small square table, the Headmaster standing at the corner between Sara and Harry.

"May we have the Orb of Arassel." He instructed.

"*The Orb!*" Ron gasped, "You didn't bring it!"

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Sara smiled. "Of course I did. You just didn't know it." She slipped a large round ring from her finger, a half globe surrounded by starburst it looked like, but when Sara set the ring on the table and breathed a strange command, a small *pop!* was heard and the Orb of Arassel stood in its place. They placed the books on the table, corner to corner, to form a small inner square with the Orb at its center. Wands were drawn and poised.

Hermione annunciated the first verse, then touched her wand to the owl symbol on the cover of her book. Each repeated the words consecutively in a clockwise rotation. It was done from memory, having rehearsed the lines so many times that no reminders were necessary. The moment Ron, who had been last to say the spell, touched his wand to the knight a bright beam of light burst forth from each book, (Ron's was blue,) and came together in the Orb to form a rainbow of color that flecked the room like a prism.

Dumbledore stepped to Hermione's shoulder. "Now for the crux."

The next spell, Harry's brilliant idea in the library, and Hermione's creation with lots of help from Dumbledore, was spoken in unison and they did it flawlessly. The crux cube, meant to hold the essence of a being in an inescapable box, manifested above the very center of the Orb, twirling on one of its shiny corners and it became a dazzling reflection of light.

At this point Dumbledore drew his wand and the others joined them at the corners of the table with their wands held out already. "The keys?" Dumbledore prompted.

Hermione raised her voice for emphasis and spoke clearly as if she were using floo powder. "*Erudium intellas!*". Sara followed with "*Celestira!*". "*Endurius Magi!*" Harry said, and Ron ended with "*Strategius Jackass!*"

"Are we ready?" the Headmaster raised an eyebrow and glanced around the circle.

"One, two three."

All present spoke at once, the teachers pointing at the Orb, three wands and one hand on the books.

"*Unitus!*"

The room exploded in light of every color and all four books fell open, the pages flipping like mad from first to last and in a flash the books slammed closed and the light was gone, blinked out and leaving them nearly blind in the dimness of candles.

Dumbledore gave a nod of satisfaction. "It is done."

A big grin spread over Ron's face. "That was *wicked!*"

McGonagall's voice was almost soft as she hid her wand away in her robe. "I want the four of you to listen to me. What we've created here could be easily used as a weapon against those it was meant to protect. You must guard these books with your lives. I don't think I need to tell you never to repeat the keys to another living soul."

"Yes, Professor."

"Speaking of keys," Snape ventured forward, his hands clasped behind his back, "What sort of nonsense is *strategius Jackass?*" Everyone laughed at once, even Dumbledore.

"We'll no one's gonna guess *that* one, are they? I mean, Sara's is easy enough, it's just an old word for Elemental. Harry's translates roughly to "The wizard who lived" and Hermione's means *know-it-all*."

"You were *supposed* to pick something that describes you and the symbol you produced!" Hermione defended.

"I *did*, didn't I?" Ron grinned and she couldn't help but laugh and nod her head.

Dumbledore circled around to stand between Harry and Sara. "Well, we have four magic books and four young Gryffindors. What are you going to call them?"

"The Ka-tet." Hermione answered.

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Snape rolled his eyes. "Well *that's* a stupid name."

Suddenly Harry's book flew open and the pages fanned like before, only the other three books lay silent on the table. Finally settling on a page, Harry leaned closer and everyone else craned their necks trying to get a look at what it was doing. A tiny comet of light ran along the handwritten lines, leaving a letter glowing in it's wake here and there. Harry strung the words together and spoke them aloud.

"The...blue...the...silver...the...purple...Hogwarts...school." He thought a moment, "It says where all the books are!"

"But isn't that bad?" Ron asked, "I mean, if the wrong person got ahold of your book, he could find the other three!"

The girls looked to Dumbledore. Snape shared a concerned glance with McGonagall, and Ron looked at Harry. Harry sighed heavily and turned his eyes to the Headmaster. "This book cannot leave Hogwarts."

"I agree, Harry," he answered in all seriousness. "The others, however, should be removed from the school as soon as possible. "Mr. Weasley? The Burrow is the perfect place for yours, and your home is well guarded. Miss Granger, I suggest you keep yours with you."

Ron nodded. "But what about Sara's?"

Dumbledore set his eyes on her in a moment of knowing silence, then spoke to Ron, but never shifted his gaze. Sara's smile was broken with guilt and trepidation. "Sara's book will be fine. Where ever it is. Now I suggest you all get to sleep. You've got a long journey in the morning." Again he let his eyes linger on Sara. "Can I see you a moment?"

"Certainly." She answered, turning her head toward her friends, "Wait for me in the hall."

McGonagall followed them out, but Snape came around the table to stand at Sara's side.

Dumbledore glanced curiously at him, but did not ask him to leave. Sara was glad he stayed. Severus was always good for moral support, even with all the sarcasm. She was scared now, facing her uncle, his wise old eyes undoubtedly having caught something in her manner, some little tell-tale sign she'd failed to cover up. She waited to hear what he had to say. He only looked at her sadly for a moment, then sat down behind his desk. Sara and Snape took the seats across from him.

"My dear niece," he began, "I don't know what drove you to such a decision, and I can't say I'm not troubled by it, but I'm not totally opposed."

"You're not?" She was shocked, and wondered which of her secrets he was referring to, the one she'd confessed to Snape or the one she hadn't.

"I don't know what has troubled you these many months, but the toll it is taking has become cause for concern and Harry has been deeply affected by it as well."

"It's Harry I mean to protect, Uncle Albus. I see the way he worries. If I don't act now, tonight, there's no telling what will happen."

"Won't you tell me what all this is about? Does it have to do with the incidents the night of the Yule Ball?"

"This has nothing at all to do with Draco Malfoy, if that's what you mean. This has to do with me alone. I've lost myself somewhere, you see, and if I don't do this I'll likely go mad or give up altogether. There is a threshold for everything, and I feel I'm about to lose my grip. I'm no good to anyone this way."

Snape laid a comforting hand over hers and she immediately grasped it and held it tight. "There is something else, Sara." Severus ventured, "You're hiding something. I realized it when we had our talk and I sense it again now. Some secrets carry the weight of lead and are poison to the mind. Perhaps it would help if you unburdened yourself."

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"How right you are, Severus." Dumbledore agreed, "It is this very secret that drove you to such a drastic solution to begin with. Sara, all things can be helped. And there are many here at Hogwarts

who would protect you from any repercussions."

"You'll know soon enough, I guess. And you'll understand this when the news comes. Just know that what I do, I do for Harry." She swallowed looming tears, "And for my own self-preservation." She stood, still holding Snape's hand and indicating that the conversation was over, she would explain nothing more. Snape and Dumbledore stood as well and walked with her to the door. She turned to her uncle at the top of the stair, where she would leave him.

"You're on to a new life tomorrow, Sara. But this will always be your home as long as I'm employed here. Your tower will remain unchanged in case you ever want to return or favor us with a visit. And your Mr. Potter is equally as welcome. In fact, please advise Harry that I'll be along to speak to him before breakfast."

"I will." She said and hugged him, feeling his old bones beneath his flowing garments. "I love you, Uncle Albus. And don't worry about me."

The ever-present sparkle had gone from his eyes as Severus led her away. Dumbledore watched her go, anxious for her, though his mind filled with thoughts of Harry Potter.

* * *

Sara had done herself the favor of a little pepper-up potion while she'd changed for the spell and was feeling better because of it. Leaving Ron and Hermione at the junction that led to Gryffindor House by the left corridor and to Sara's tower straight ahead and to the right, was not as difficult as she'd thought it would be. There were no tears. Mostly because they both thought they would be seeing her on the train. *Hell*, she thought, *a million different things could happen between then and now*. She hugged them both and kissed their cheeks, but maintained her partially induced smile and kept her composure light and casual. Her heart broke a little when they parted. Hermione, her best and closest friend, and Ron, who she utterly adored and loved dearly. Their smiling faces etched in her mind, she took Harry's hand.

He was quiet as they walked, surely thinking about her as she was thinking about him. She wanted to be in good spirits tonight. No tears and nervous hands. No worried glances. Just the two of them together in their tower rooms for the last time. And she knew that come morning, she might lose him forever.

* * *

Harry smiled down at her as they landed outside her door, she on the Firebolt, he on the Lightning Mach 2. She seemed better tonight, he thought, not so down and listless. Her eyes were alive when she smiled at him, and there was a sweetness in her manner, a softness in her touch, that had gone in the last few weeks and had never so appealed to his gentle nature.

She led him to the dressing room, where they changed out of their formal robes and into pajamas. Sara wore one of the white silk half-slip nightgowns he favored so highly and he watched it float down around her body as she slipped it over her head. Quickly, he looked away when she turned and busied himself with his own clothes. She waited until he'd dressed, then touched a hand to his cheek and smiled. "Come Harry, we'll make some tea."

As Harry used his wand to boil the water, Sara went to turn the bed down. Her eyes fell heavily on the large stone at the base of the wall, behind which was a box that held all her secrets. She took the most recent letter from Lucius, which had come last Saturday night, from this box hastily, using magic to replace the stone and hurried to the bathroom with it. Locking the door, she turned and sighed against it, regarding the letter with consternation. She sat on the edge of the bathtub and opened it for the 14th time in six days. She lit one of the cigarettes she kept hidden under the sink, and held it with a shaky hand as she read his words.

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My Dearest Sara,

I have come to the realization that you plan to defy me no matter what it costs you. So it falls to me, in a matter of speaking, to raise the price. My patience has all but deserted me and I will wait no longer for you to let go of this childish notion of fairytale romance. You will come to me next Saturday night or you will lose what is most precious to you. You know what I speak of.

If you decide to seek outside assistance in this matter, do it with this knowledge. There is another we have in common. The same someone that writes to me on your behalf. The promise I made regarding him has not expired. Remember this when you consider your options. Your silence and compliance will keep everything you hold dear safe from harm.

Use the port key I gave you. I will make sure the house is empty for reasons of discretion. You will be seen here by no one. I will await you, my Belladonna, until the first light of dawn. Pray you are here by then.

L.

Sara folded the parchment and slid it neatly back into its envelope. She slipped it into the pocket of her robe, which hung on a hook next to Harry's. She could hear him rattling teacups in the bedroom and knew her time had run out. She'd just have to put it away later.

He was grinning when she returned, standing at the foot of the bed in his black silk pajamas, barefoot, and holding a long white rose. The rose he gave to her and she smiled up at him, the mix of emotions she felt were overwhelming. Tears threatened for the hundredth time that day, but she forced them into retreat. She would not cry in front of him, not tonight. She kissed him and went to get a vase.

Harry was in bed when she returned, the flower settled in an inch of water. She placed it on the nightstand next to her cup, which she lifted once she'd climbed in and propped up her pillows.

"Are you scared, Sara? Of leaving Hogwarts, of being on our own?"

"Yes." She answered truthfully, "More than you know."

"Is that what's been bothering you? You seem alright today, but are you really?"

"I'm fine." She tried to reassure him, "But there are demons in me, Harry. There are aspects of myself that I need to deal with before I can truly move on. But right now, here with you, I feel like everything will be okay." She wanted to tell him how much she loved him, wrap her arms around him and spill the whole story, but she only smiled and took his hand across the coverlet.

"There is one thing that troubles me, Sara. I noticed it some months ago, but never brought it up because it seemed like nothing."

"What is it?"

He held out his hand for her to see and traced his love line, identical to hers in every way. "What is this?" He asked, indicating a disruption in the line, a place where it split in two like a river around an island. "What does it mean?"

"It doesn't mean anything." She lied.

Harry pulled his hand back for closer study, shrugged, and dropped it to his lap. Sara finished her tea around the same time Harry did and when he set his cup down, he came back with a tiny box closed in his hand. Sara didn't notice.

"Harry, I put the port keys to the cottage in our backpacks. I put the muggle keys, the ones for the doors, in your bag as well."

"Ok." He smiled, getting his nerve up. "Sara, I have something for you."

"Alive or dead?" She grinned.

He placed the velvet box in her hand, "See for yourself."

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She opened the box and stared at the ring, her face surprised, but unreadable.

"If you still want to marry me, that is." He started to get nervous as her eyes misted over. "We'll have to wait awhile of course. A year or two."

She looked at him and tears fell gracefully. He could tell she was holding back a flood of emotion, her brow wrinkled with it. "Sara," He took her hand in both of his, "I wanted to make you this promise."

"It's beautiful, Harry." She said at last, her voice hushed and unsteady. He took the ring and put it on her finger, smiling with infinite adoration.

"By accepting this, I make a promise to you as well. You are the only one for me, and I love you no matter what. I always will." She hugged him, "If your feelings ever change I will know and this ring will be returned to you."

"Never." He said.

"Someday Harry, I *will* be your Mrs. Potter, but you're right. We have to wait. We're young and inexperienced in the ways of the world. And like I said, I'm no good to you until I've dealt with my problems. We've made a promise to each other tonight, and this," she looked at the ring, "pleases me more than you could know. It means there's something waiting for me, a light in the darkness."

This is not how Harry had envisioned this moment. Of course he hadn't expected her to run about the room in delight, he'd seen her apathy spiral down and down and only hoped to bring a smile to her face. The diamond ring he'd purchased nearly a year before had certainly accomplished this, but he got the feeling she was trying to tell him something he did not understand. "Whenever you're ready, Sara. I will wait through eternity, but you have to *do* something. Talk to someone. Talk to me."

She smiled, running her hand through his hair in a loving gesture. "You don't know what it means to hear you say that. You're words, the very sound of your voice has a way of putting me at ease. Half of my fears, Harry, are that I might lose you."

"You're mad."

"Perhaps."

Harry smiled in the dim light of the candles. He wiped the tears from her face as she lowered into the bed and lay on the pillow facing him. The candles went out, leaving the room in darkness and they moved closer, meeting in the middle.

She kissed him and his arms went around her, the gentle way she touched him undiminished. Harry clung to her pulling her close, afraid of the moment she would pull away, knowing tomorrow as they set out together for a new house and a new life, that she would look at him with her black hair and her morose eyes and his heart would break completely. She loved him, of this he was certain. But he was at a loss, desperate to help her and not knowing how. Unable to come down to where she was.

He felt her hands drifting over him and followed her lead. He felt the silk of her nightgown slide away beneath his fingers as she undid his buttons and pulled the shirt over his arms where it fell to the floor. He pulled at her nightgown and she sat up while he lifted it over her head, and she looked at him in the moonlight. Her eyes held no fear in them, no reluctance. Only trust. He smiled in the dark, his hand found her and brought her close and he kissed her again, lowering her to the pillows.

As he hovered above he kissed her face, her neck. "Are you sure?" He whispered.

Her hand rested softly on his cheek and raised his head to look at her. She held his gaze and smiled sweetly as she caressed his face, brushing a thumb across the thin silver scar.

"Yes."

* * *

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Sara stood at the foot of the bed. She was dressed all in black, her cloak easily hiding her face, though a thick lock of black hair tumbled down her shoulder. Her eyes fell on the letter, left propped against the vase on her nightstand where he would see it, then she noticed the rose he had given her. It was a gossamer collection of moonlight, shining bright in the dark. Ironic, she thought, he had chosen white,

the color of innocence, for this of all nights. She felt tears on her face as she looked at him, asleep in the bed, his lips curled in a slight smile, the most innocent of all and the one she would hurt the most. From her cloak she brought out the larger of the two bottles Snape had given her and drank half its contents. The rest she returned to its pocket, just in case. She checked one last time that her bottle of Finnegan's Swill, as well as a bottle of vintage Bordeaux were in her bag. Silently she crept along her side of the bed, reaching gingerly to lift the rose and hurried back to her bag, filled with her miniaturized suitcases, and hefted it onto her shoulder. She took the Firebolt where it rested against the wall and pulled a small box from her pocket. Opening it, her fingers lingered over the figure of a silver serpent. She glanced back at Harry one last time and her voice was a choked whisper as she spoke her parting words.

"Goodbye, my love."

"Hello, My dear." Lucius purred, "Now, now, none of this crying nonsense. Cheer up, Sara. Some wine should help to calm you."

"Thanks, but I brought my own. I wouldn't drink *anything* you gave me. But I'll be needing a glass if you don't mind."

She dropped the Firebolt, leaned her bag against the coffee table, and sat heavily on the sofa. It was the same parlor they'd been in before and it was still just as uninviting, lacking even an iota of warmth. "I hate this room." She announced.

"Really? I've always thought this room had, well, *personality*." He came back with two glasses and sat beside her.

"It's cold. And saturated with darkness. Actually, when you consider that horrible fireplace, it's downright disturbing. Your right." She scowled, "It has *your* personality."

"I choose to ignore the insult so not to ruin the evening, but you're quite correct in a way. This is my personal study." She allowed him to open the bottle and pour some into her glass. He moved it over his empty one and waited for her permission before pouring some for himself. "I suppose, judging from the broom and the bag of luggage, that you're leaving Potter."

"Yes." She answered and her breath caught in her throat as she raised the glass to her lips. She summoned every ounce of courage she had and drank it down, returning it to the table, where she refilled it. Lucius sipped his, smiled at its smooth taste, and drank the rest in one gulp. Sara refilled his as well.

"You have a knowledge of fine wines, I must say. This is *very* good."

"Have all you want." She smiled, "But drink up Lucius, the night will only last so long."

"What's with the rose?" He wondered as he savored his new glass, sipping it again and again.

"It was a gift." She hadn't realized she was still holding it and smiled as she inhaled the sweetness of the pristine bloom before laying it on the table. Looking at it reminded her of everything she hated about Lucius, as well as all the reasons she was here, at Malfoy Manor, at three in the morning. She stood and wandered the room with her glass, taking the slightest little sips, wanting her wits about her for what was to come.

He watched her wander his study in the dark, the fire the only light in the room, touching nothing, disinterested. Her voice came low and clear as she settled back aside the mantle, watching the fire play in his hair. "Do you know why I'm here?"

"Of course. To save Potter's skin I imagine."

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"But that's only part of it. I'm here to put an end to something. I can live in the shadow of threat no more. Do you understand, Lucius? Do you even know how I hate you?"

"You don't hate me." he mused, "You hate the way you feel about me."

"Have no doubt, I hate you." She told him, her voice strong, but soft and detached. "What I do tonight, I do out of love. But not for you."

"I'm touched. Potter is such a *prize* after all."

"Did you know that students cannot be inducted into an Order? That is why tonight, after the graduation ceremony, five very old men entered the hall and right there, in front of the whole school, they called Harry Potter to stand among them and he was made Order of Merlin, Wizard 1st Class."

"Really?" Lucius wondered, genuinely surprised. "They usually make one wait *years* to bestow such an honor. Mr. Potter's name certainly carries him far. Whatever would he be without it?" Lucius stood and went to where she stood beside the mantle. The very place he'd accosted her in the fall. "Tell me, did Draco receive any honors?"

"Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger were the only others. Wizards 2nd class."

"Seems a shame to spend your life one step behind your best friend. But then they are who they are, a worthless mud blood and one of the dregs."

She didn't explode in a flurry of defense for her friends, as he expected, giving him cause to push her against the stone and hold her there. She surprised him with a smile. "Your ignorant words only strengthen my resolve." She laughed a little, "You're going to make this easy for me, you know." Sara felt a horrible twinge in her stomach, grimaced without his notice, and knew the time had come. There was a calm about her, an inner peace that removed her from her body, allowed her to stand aside while she stepped closer and kissed him, bringing forth all of the secret desires she'd harbored so long, letting them guide her through the motions. His arms wrapped tightly around her at first, then roamed her body before tugging at her clothes roughly until her attempts to keep him at bay began to fail and she pushed him away. She moved herself out of his reach and straightened her hair and her clothes.

"You're like a schoolboy, Lucius. I was hoping for a little finesse on your part."

"If it's finesse you want, well, that comes later." He crossed the short distance and grabbed her mercilessly, the kiss insistent and demanding. Lucius tossed her onto the sofa and hesitated as she watched him, thinking he would come crashing down on her any second. She saw the pain in his face, his brow creased in mild distress. Only a moment went by before the discomfort left him and he sat on the edge of the sofa, facing her, snaking a hand over her light sweater. Her hand touched his cheek and pulled him closer. She kissed him again with a vengeance, digging her nails into his skin, tangling a hand in his beautiful white hair. She noticed some of the command had gone from his aggression and smiled inwardly. It was exactly as she wanted. To let him have the opportunity he so coveted, have it right in his grasp, but to be rendered incapable.

Another bolt of pain sent him back into a sitting position and he held his stomach, his eyes squeezed shut.

"Drink some wine, it might help." She offered and pulled herself up, reclining against the arm of the couch. "Terrible timing, whatever it is."

"I've never felt anything like this." He whispered and finished his glass. A moment later, he drank hers down as well and was racked by horrifying abdominal cramps as a result. Sara got to her feet and helped him to a comfortable armchair by the fire. She smiled as she covered him with a light blanket and laughed with giddy anxiety. "I told you more wine would help."

"What do you mean?" He managed through deep, labored breaths, "The wine made it worse!"

"What I mean is, it would kill you faster. It's full of poison, you see."

"But you drank it! You're lying!"

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"You *stupid* man," she hissed, "do you really think I'd let you control me like this? Do you think I would let you threaten my Harry? I took the antidote before I ever left Hogwarts."

"*What is it?!*" he demanded and she could tell he wanted to cry out in pain but wouldn't. Even in the end he refused to show a human side. "What have you given me?"

"I got the idea from you, actually. You once described me as '*easily the death of any man.*' How ironic, that man turned out to be you, Lucius. *Your Belladonna* you call me, cloaked in midnight purple. A brilliant analogy, for it is belladonna which now takes your life."

"Give me the antidote." He pleaded, "I'll never bother you again. I give you my word I won't harm a hair on Potter's head."

"Down to that, are we?" She paced before him, "But you see, I *do* have pity in my heart for you. But not mercy. You will die tonight, to be certain." She took a seat on the sofa, got the bottle of Finnegan's Swill from her bag, and drank from it as she watched him go through the struggle.

"All I wanted..." he gasped, "was your acceptance. I'm a uncompromising man and one who hates to be denied." He labored over his breathing, clutching the blanket to his chest, his voice soft and tired, "And by you, Sara, who captivated all my senses. I'm quite fond of you, did you know? I would never have hurt you, not for anything." His face twisted in pain. "*Tapestra Arachno Necrosia.*" He said and pulled his wand on her, spending the last of his strength to the curse her and she was caught off guard. She feared for her life, but the panic left her when she felt only a slight tickle on her skin, near her hip and just below the small of her back. Pulling her clothing aside, Sara looked in horror at the mark he'd given her, the size of a quarter. The black widow spider, a thin red hourglass etched on it's back. She snapped back around to glare at him. "Why didn't you kill me when you had the chance? Why put such an ugly thing on me when you could have made Shakespeare envious."

"Not everyone loves a tragedy." He whispered as his hands fell into his lap and he collapsed against the back of his chair. His muscles were shutting down and she knew it wouldn't be much longer.

"You see Lucius, this had to come to a *tragic* end. Being the Elemental gives me certain...*vulnerabilities* which I'm sure you're aware of. Resisting you, turning my back on what drew my most profound curiosity, completely consumed me. It wasn't so difficult at first, but it wore away at me, weakened me in a sense. I could never hope to resist you much longer, and your threats on Harry scared me to death. I would do anything for him, Lucius." She took a swallow of rum, "He proposed, you know. He gave me this beautiful ring and I took it. And then I left him, stole away like a thief in the night with just a few last minute words scribbled on a single sheet. Do you know why?" She struggled, tears coursing down her face, she waited for his answer, though he'd become too weak to speak. "It's because you brought out the very worst in me, fractured my soul, forced me into silence at the cost of my very happiness. Perhaps I should have left the ring. I don't know. I kept it because I made a promise to him that I intend to keep. And for that to happen I had to eliminate the obstacle. That would be you." Finally, she stowed the bottle and went to him when she saw he'd begun to slip away. She cried silently as she kissed his lips and the breath of life departed him forever. She sighed as she stroked his hair and whispered "*Good night, dark prince. May flights of devils bring you to your rest.*"

The wine went into her bag, then Sara slipped the backpack over her arms. She pulled her black satin cloak around her shoulders, raising the hood to hide her face in shadow. Regarding him one last time, Sara was invaded by a sense of *deja vu*. What she was seeing was the image that had flashed through her mind many times before. Lucius, sitting in a chair, his eyes distant and clouded. *No*, she thought, *lifeless*.

The white rose caught her eye and she picked it up, kissed it's petals, and laid it across his lap. The little ring Draco had given her for Christmas, the one that meant *Thanks for Everything* slid easily from her finger and she left this on the little table next to his father's chair. "*I'm sorry, Draco.*" She whispered and drank the rest of the antidote before locking the door to the study and leaving through

the front door, Firebolt in hand, waiting to take her anywhere.

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She had a maddening desire to leave Great Britain, but she instead flew into London, not far from Diagon Alley. Mr. Sanders was awake and dressed when she knocked and ushered her inside his tiny apartment. She knew something drastic had happened to her hair the moment his eyes fell upon her.

He tried to cover his shock quickly, but not before she saw it.

Sara wanted to drive out of England, take the tunnel to France. She couldn't fly with Mr. Sanders and Topenga, who had waited for her here at her instruction. She had bought a black SUV for him to use back when she and Harry had bought the house, for hauling landscaping materials, deliveries, and whatever else she required. It was empty now, except for his few belongings and some provisions. He had tea on, waiting for her and she sipped it gratefully, the warmth calming her nerves and glowing in her stomach, ravaged by poison, it's antidote, and a good amount of rum. She reclined in an old second hand armchair, holding the cup and watching him as he loaded Topenga into her new cage and carried her out to the truck.

When he returned he took up her backpack, then simply stared at her with a questioning, hesitant to ask.

"Please don't, Greg. I can't tell you anything."

"You don't look like you should be on your own right now, Sara. This is no trip you're taking. You're running away."

"You're right, I am. And as for being on my own, that's why I have you."

"What about Harry?" He asked, "Will he be meeting us somewhere?"

"Mr. Sanders," her tone was one of warning, "Never speak that name to me again."

"I'm sorry." He said and lowered his head. "But if you want to clear customs before sun-up we best get on our way."

Sara stood and followed him out, carrying her backpack and turning off the lights. He glanced curiously at the Firebolt, which she had disguised as a muggle broom, but didn't inquire further. After all, she wasn't paying him to ask questions, just drive her where she wanted to go, carry the luggage, and take care of the bills. Sara took the locator from under her sweater as he helped her into the cab and looked through the glass. Ron, Hermione, and Harry were set to *sleeping*. Her own hand was on *traveling*.

She sighed as Mr. Sanders maneuvered onto the road and settled into her seat. She thought she would want to be alone, but was glad for his company. He said nothing, just quietly hummed along to the radio and kept his eyes on the road, aware she wasn't in a talkative mood. The pepper-up she'd taken at school had long ago worn off and she was left feeling lost and desperate.

Sara leaned her head against the window, watching the city roll away behind them until buildings turned to houses and houses turned to darkness, the slow drone of the wheels comforting her. She thought of her tower bedroom, far behind her now, and imagined him asleep in their bed, his father's watch on the stand next to his glasses, his scar glowing silver in the moonlight, not knowing that he slept alone. Her eyes grew heavy and closed and Sara imagined herself beside him, his arm around her shoulder, and she could almost feel his warmth envelope her like a blanket. A smile touched her lips as she drifted off, his voice echoing through her dreams.

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Book Three: The Lion and the Tempest

17. The Infinite Sadness

Harry smiled when he awoke, his eyes still closed, his dream-fuzzy mind lingering on the night he'd spent with Sara. It had been better that he'd ever imagined, sweet and perfect and emotionally intense. He felt closer to her now, closer on a different level, intimate, entwined and committed. "Sara?" He whispered and snaked his hand across the bed, feeling for her sleeping form in the dimness of dawn, soft gray light filtering in through the doors as birds chirped in the trees around the lake. He opened his eyes to find the bed empty, his hand resting where she used to be.

A foreboding crept up his spine and he knew she was gone. As he pulled himself up and went for his glasses, a cold stone hand wrapped around his heart. "Sara?" He called to the empty room. His echoing voice was met with no reply.

Harry swallowed hard as he pulled on his pajamas and got to his feet. He looked through the doors, but didn't see her on the roof. His second guess was the bathroom though he didn't hear the shower running and checked the kitchen on the way, hoping she was making tea. She wasn't. He tried the dressing room next, another of her favorite places, but found it still and lifeless, empty with most of her things packed in huge suitcases, like Aunt Marge had used, all piled in the middle of the room. But then they weren't. They were gone. Every last one of them.

His breath caught in his throat as panic gripped him and he ran from the room, threw open the doors and hurried across the roof. "Sara?!" He yelled, "SARA!"

He went to the wall and looked down at the grounds, around the lake, the Quidditch Pitch in the distance, silent and undisturbed. There was no movement anywhere, even the birds had gone silent. Harry sluggishly went back inside. His arms hung at his sides, shoulders slumped, his face despondent, overwhelmed by misery and desperate for someone to tell him it was all a joke. She'd brought her things down to the train and he was just being paranoid. He clung to this idea, desperate for a single thread of hope. Of the fact that she was gone he was certain.

He found his father's watch where he'd left it on the nightstand, slipped it on, then stood staring down

at the unmade bed, wondering what to do. He had to do *something*, after all. Tell Dumbledore. And find her.

His eyes happened upon the letter, propped against the candle by her side of the bed. A lavender envelope, *Captain* written across the front, set atop a larger package, wrapped with brown paper. Harry rounded the bed and took the purple letter in his hands and lowered himself to the coverlet.

Dear Harry,

I write this in the dark and have only a fleeting moment. You're asleep right now and I fear you'll awake and find me here, dressed for a night of flight. If you think I'm a coward, you're right, but I have my reasons. Escaping is simply something I must do. I'm not leaving you, Harry. Not really. You once said you would forgive me anything. Can you really? Can you forgive me this? Would you really wait forever? I'm taking my chances, hoping words spoken in love can stand the test of time and truth and I wear the promise you made me on my finger, where it became my promise, too.

I know your first reaction will be to find me, as that's exactly what I would do if I woke and found you gone. Please, Harry, do not come after me. I need to be alone and deal with things in my own way. I ask you to trust me.

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Please don't blame yourself. You did nothing wrong. You have been the only light in my life these past few months.

I'm Sorry.

Love Always,

Sara

He couldn't breathe. The air had turned to lead in his chest as helplessness invaded him. He grabbed the package and ripped it open, desperate for more than the few words in her letter. There were three things in the package. A very old book, *Celestira*, a thick envelope, and a flat velvet box. The third item grabbed his curiosity and he set the other things aside to open it. There was a scrap of paper, which he removed, and a crimson amulet, flat and thin, like her Fortificus Charm, but square and swirling with a shimmering liquid. He read the note that had accompanied it.

This is an amoridon and it holds the essence of my love. It will live as long my love for you endures, but never fear, Harry. I have a feeling it will never turn black.

He immediately slipped the gold chain over his head and tucked the essence of her love in its thin diamond shell under his shirt where it was warm and comforting against his skin.

The envelope, he found, contained three stacks of American \$100 bills, banded together, a credit card with his name on it, and another note.

For our house, and absolutely anything else you want. Get some new clothes, buy a car, take a trip.

Anything. Contact the lawyer, Brad Silverman, for any needs this cannot cover. I have left instructions for him to hire a gardener and a housekeeper.

Harry tossed these things onto the bed, anger rising like the tide, grief twisting around despondency and wringing the shock from his mind. "This can't be." He told his shaking hands, "Sara would never do this to me."

There was a soft knock at the door and Dumbledore pushed it open. Harry's head shot up, thinking it might be Sara, having changed her mind about leaving. Harry leapt to his feet and made to speak, but Dumbledore held up a hand.

"She's gone, then." He said in a grave and saddened voice, "It's as I thought."

"Where is she?" He demanded, "Professor, I know she must have told *you*."

"She did not. I only guessed her plan last night and she neither confirmed nor denied it, and gave no indication at all to the nature of this dilemma from which she suffers."

"I don't understand! Why would she leave like this? In the middle of the night with a last minute note and no explanation? Was her life in danger?"

"I don't know."

"She would tell me if it was! Just like she told me about Voldemort. She knows I would protect her. I just don't get it, *it makes no sense!*"

"Harry," Dumbledore stepped closer, "Sara *doesn't* want us to understand. Last night while we were talking, she said she had lost herself. I believe she has gone to find herself again and that sort of healing must be done on one's own terms, and often alone."

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"But she took the ring!" He argued, his frustration building, "She's coming back, I know she is! A few days, maybe a week, right? Don't you think?"

"There's no way to be sure."

Snape appeared in the doorway, looking solemn, as if entering a funeral. "She took the ring?" He asked, "You proposed?"

Harry felt oddly embarrassed and his anger spiked at discussing such a private moment with Severus Snape. He held it at bay and nodded his head, feeling defeated. "Yes."

"And *she* took the ring?" He appeared puzzled.

"Yes." Harry dropped his eyes to the floor and wandered away from the bed, his back to them so he could hide his anguish.

"She left a note!" Snape's eyes widened and he crossed to the bed's foot, but Harry threw out his hand and used magic to snatch the letter away.

"It's mine!" He snapped, a frightened look on his face. "It's written to me and *you can't read it!*" He quickly folded the page and stuffed it back in the envelope, not really knowing why he was so horrified by the thought of someone else reading his letter.

"As you wish." Snape conceded, thinking Potter was on the verge of losing it, "But did she say anything that you might be willing to share with us?"

"She said..." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, "She said that she was a coward but that she had her reasons. That escaping was something she simply must do." Pain twisted in his chest as he remembered her words and for the first time felt a sting behind his eyes.

"She gave no explanation?"

"No, okay? I haven't got a goddamned *clue*."

"Well neither do I. She never told me why she was leaving, just that she was."

Dumbledore interrupted, surprised. "You knew, Severus?"

"Yes." He admitted heavily. "She came to my lab before the binding."

"You knew? You *actually knew* and you let her leave?" Harry raised his voice, "What the hell is *wrong* with you? Have you *looked* at her lately?"

"That's exactly *why* I let her leave." Snape narrowed his eyes. Harry glared at him, his anger apparent.

"Calm down Harry." Dumbledore suggested, "We *all* want answers. Severus?" He turned to Snape,

"Why did you not come to me *immediately* when my niece revealed her intentions?"

"She asked me not to. I gave my word."

"And why didn't she tell me herself?"

"Yes," Harry glared, "why did she tell *you*? Why not her uncle? Why not me?"

"She said the Headmaster was the only person alive who could talk her out of it. As for you Potter, there were a few things Sara wanted me to relay to you that she felt she could not say in person."

"*What!*" He demanded, "*What did she tell you?*"

Professor McGonagall entered silently and stood at the back near the door so not to interrupt.

"She wanted you to know that leaving was an act of self-preservation. It had nothing to do with you, or anyone else here for that matter. As for the malady itself, she said trying to overcome it while bearing the pretense of a normal life was hopeless, like swimming against the current, afraid of what the truth could do to those closest to her. She also said that you won't understand, but there was something she had to do that you wouldn't approve of. What ever it might be, she did it to protect both of you."

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"But...but last night! I mean, she took the ring and...it was..." A pained expression saddened his eyes and he found he could look at none of them.

"Harry?" Dumbledore's gentle voice inquired, "What happened after you gave her the ring?"

Unable to meet his eyes, Harry stared at the floor, opened his mouth to speak, his mind racing, stumbling over words and finally giving no reply. The room was silent and Dumbledore softly smiled.

"Oh dear." McGonagall sighed, "Well I hope you were a gentleman."

Harry left them and moved to stare out the doors at the roof beyond, feeling the sting behind his eyes again and suddenly wishing they would all go away. He wanted to cry. There were many times throughout his life when he'd wanted to cry and this was all of them in a single moment.

"Potter," Snape's voice was sympathetic, "She asked that you not write to her."

"*Shut-up!*" Harry bellowed, spinning around to face him, "You're a liar! Sara would *never* say that!"

"She thought it would be best."

"*GET OUT!*" he yelled, "*Get out!* You let her leave and you expect me to listen to your *snake tongued lies*? How do I know you didn't hand her over to Voldemort? You disgust me, *Snape!* You vile, Slytherin trash, *get out of my sight!*"

"Look, Potter--"

Snape ducked as Harry hurled something at him. Dumbledore never flinched as he sent the object off it's trajectory and it smashed against a wall. Snape was in the doorway, looking riled, but sincere.

"This is not my fault, Potter." He said and left.

Harry was no longer listening, he had turned his back and was watching the sky it seemed, oblivious to everything except the pain of his loss. He felt a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Come Harry,"

McGonagall said and guided him back to the bed, where he laid down. She pulled the blankets up to his chin and brushed his hair back. It was a caring gesture and it stirred something in him he had been too angry to feel until now and he pulled the covers over his head, curling up into a ball. The blankets shivered as Harry trembled beneath them, his breathing abnormal. Minerva sighed. "I'll make him some tea, Albus."

When she had left the room Dumbledore sat on Sara's side, laying a comforting hand on Harry's shoulder and he could feel him shaking under the coverlet. "Stay at Hogwarts, Harry. You're always welcome here."

"Thank you, sir." Harry whispered.

Dumbledore lifted the book Sara had left, thumbed through it and set it on the empty pillow. "I suggest you read this." He said, "Sara left it for you because it contains information that will give you insight. Harry, the nature of the Elemental is complicated. When you consider Sara's recent depression and the path she took, remember that when one's emotions are entwined with the world, it can be powerfully overwhelming. Especially for a young girl who has seen terrible tragedy in her life, and has found a source of happiness she could never bear to lose. There are constants with her kind, some which fight her own free will. That kind of inner struggle could push even the strongest person to the edge of madness. But don't fear for Sara. She knows what's wrong and she won't come back until she has fixed it. Don't mourn her absence, Harry. Believe in her instead."

A choked noise came from the blankets. Dumbledore patted Harry's shoulder and stood. "I'll return to

see how you're doing. If you want to talk, just send your owl." He sighed, dismayed by the state of his favorite student. "Time, Harry. In time, *all* things come full circle."

* * *

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"Let me get the door for you." Mr. Sanders offered as he helped her through the hotel corridor. Sara collapsed against the wall and closed her eyes. He slid the card through the slot and pushed it open, holding her arm with one hand, fearing she'd fall. Sara had slept all the way to the border of France, but he'd awakened her as they went through customs. After that she had cried the entire trip and seemed to grow weaker and weaker until he feared she was sick. She had barely said a word to him and he had asked no questions.

"Come on, girl." He said with a hushed, concerned voice, "Let's get you inside." She tried to walk, but was dazed, almost incoherent and her steps were unsteady. With her backpack over one shoulder, he lifted her off her feet and carried her into the room, setting her down in a chair near the bed. He removed her shoes and the sweater she wore. He certainly wasn't changing her clothes. But then she didn't have anything to change into, did she? Why had she brought only one small backpack?

She looked down at him as he unzipped the bag and looked confusedly at tiny pieces of luggage. It was the first time he had caught her eye since she'd arrived at his apartment and what he saw there deeply disturbed him.

"Back away." She said and lifted her hand with obvious effort. "*Finite Reducto*."

Sara's hand dropped back into her lap as seven leather suitcases leapt out of the backpack and landed full-size.

Greg fell back a step, "What the *hell*?!"

"My mother taught me that one." She whispered with the voice of the dead or the dying. Sanders thought she sounded almost as bad as she looked, and never in a million years did he think a beautiful girl like Sara could ever look so horribly wretched. And her hair! He knew it wasn't dye. He'd seen enough of women's hair to know that one black piece was natural. It was bizarre, and downright disturbing what had happened, and it gave him an uneasy feeling.

"The smallest one." She instructed, "There's a white oxford."

He found the shirt and got it out, not daring to question her about the supernatural luggage, and laid it across her knees.

"You'll have to help me." She said, her voice growing weaker by the moment, "I can't."

"Sara, it wouldn't be proper for a man my age to help a teenager out of her clothes."

"I trust you, Greg." She said, "I need to wear this. *I have to*, please help me."

He hesitated, torn between wanting to do as she asked and his better judgment. Finally, he gripped the hem of her shirt and closed his eyes. "I won't look," he said and pulled. She nearly fell out of the chair but he managed to keep her upright. Maybe less haste and more gentleness would help. As it was he felt extremely guilty, like a criminal, and wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible. He felt for the oxford, which was obviously Harry's, and got her arms into it. He'd had his eyes squeezed shut so long there was a regular fireworks show on the backs of his lids, and he really needed to either relax or open them. Since opening them wasn't an option, he took a deep breath and set to steady his hands. He did the buttons gingerly, ever mindful of keeping a light touch.

Now that she was dressed again, he looked at her. He had a million questions, none of which were his business to ask, but he was worried about her. She slipped her hands around her arms, almost as if she were embracing the shirt, holding it closer to her. Tears ran down her cheeks and that, to him, was unbearable.

He lifted her, carrying her to the bed, which had been turned down, and laid her on the pillow, pulling the covers up and around her.

"My pants. Take off my pants."

"No."

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She tried to catch her breath, he knew he shouldn't make her talk anymore, it was obviously difficult, but this he simply could not do. He had always considered himself an honorable man and it just wasn't right.

"Do you like to sleep in your pants?"

He saw her point. He had to do it, for she could not and he wanted her to be comfortable. His brow furrowed in consternation, Sanders slid his hands beneath the sheets and removed her pants, wanting to run from the room the entire time and half expecting the police to knock the door down and take him away.

"Sara," he said as he set them aside, "Let me call someone. You're not well."

"That's why I left."

"You need help."

"I have you."

"You're upset."

"I have reason to be."

"You're crying. Sara, you're devastated."

Her voice was a choked whisper and she spoke with effort. "I *miss him*, Greg."

"I know." He lowered his eyes, knowing something terrible had happened between Sara and Harry.

He'd known it from the start.

"My heart has turned black tonight." Her silent tears dripped onto the pillow. "I think I might die of

this misery."

"Now you listen to me." He leaned over and stroked her hair, brushing it back from her face, "If you've got a black heart, I'm Captain Kangaroo. Now let your troubles rest for awhile. Get some sleep."

He waited in the chair in the dark, watching her until he knew she slept, then let himself out.

* * *

Dumbledore was in his bedside chair when he awoke. The room was dark, the moon dusting silver in his long white hair and beard. "I've brought you a cup of tea, Harry." He said.

"Thank you." Harry mumbled and reached for it. He took a sip. Earl Grey. His favorite. "What time is it, Professor?"

"Nine. You've slept a long time."

"I woke up now and then, just didn't feel like moving."

"Do you feel any better, now that you've rested awhile?"

"A little. Not really."

"Tell me what's on your mind, Harry. Why do you think Sara left Hogwarts?"

"It was too much for her I think. She's scared. She told me so a dozen times. We had all these plans, we bought a little house and we that's where we were going when we got to London. I thought we would be there by now." He grew silent for a moment. "Then I gave her the ring. I keep thinking she knew I would. She's a seer, after all and has the Orb of Arassel. Maybe she saw something in it she didn't like."

"You believe you chased her away."

"Yes."

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"I think you might be wrong. I fear the problem maybe something much more than that. Don't be so quick to blame yourself." He suddenly remembered the object in his hand. "Oh yes, this letter came for you. It's from Draco Malfoy."

"Malfoy?" Harry pulled himself up, grabbed his wand and lit the candles. He took the letter and tore it open. If there was one other person who knew what troubled Sara, it was Draco Malfoy.

Potter,

Surprised to hear from me? Believe me, I have better things to do than write to you, but there's something you need to know. I'm not telling you for your benefit, of course, but because Sara needs help.

Next to the right side nightstand by Sara's bed there is a loose stone at the base of the wall. Behind it you will find a great deal of correspondence from my father. He started writing to her soon after that night at my house and she encountered him a few times as well.

I found out about it the day of the Yule Ball when I arrived at the tower to find her crying. I insisted she tell someone, but he'd threatened her to silence and she swore me to secrecy. And Christmas? She lied to you. I found my father's cane on the roof, snapped in two near her cloak, which was thrown on the floor. All the furniture was overturned. She asked me to hide it and used the holiday as an excuse. I don't know why I agreed, but she'd already set the school on fire and I thought that was enough for one day.

I break my word today, Potter. Don't make me sorry. Do something about this.

DM

Harry threw the letter aside and it was picked up unpretentiously by Dumbledore, who set to reading it at once. Harry hurried from the bed and used his wand to find the stone. It was as Malfoy said. The large, overflowing shoebox was packed with letters and small packages, still wrapped in brown paper as if she'd never even considered opening them. He took the whole thing to his bed and sat on Sara's side. Dumbledore climbed lithely onto the other and took out the first letter.

"Curious." He said, "It's addressed to *Sara Francis, Ravenclaw House*."

"That's what she told him the night I rescued Draco from the cellar."

"Clever, using her middle name. It would make it much more difficult for him to sense deceit."

Harry read silently. "He was watching her." He announced and Dumbledore sighed.

"Why didn't I know it?" He wondered.

Harry handed the letter to Dumbledore and opened the next. They went on this way for more than an hour, occasionally noting certain events aloud. They followed the downward path the letters took, from disturbing, yet merely flirtatious invitations to veiled threats, demands, and outright lies. They understood as Sara had that Lucius discovered Harry had been involved in Draco's escape and he dangled the knowledge in front of her, never making it certain. It was through the letters that Harry learned about the night of the Yule ball. Sara had kissed Draco Malfoy. It pained him at first, regardless of what he himself had done, and then he found it didn't matter. It changed nothing, wasn't even important and he didn't hold it against her.

"This is from her!" Harry said, getting excited and pulling the purple paper from its envelope, much like the one he'd received that morning. It was more of a note, sent back to her, with a short response scribbled on the back. Dumbledore leaned in and they read it together.

Lucius,

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You know what you ask is impossible. Why don't you give up already? How many ways can I say no before you finally get it? I want no relationship with you whatsoever beyond "acquaintance" and even that's a stretch. How could I have a single shred of fondness for a Deatheater who delights in killing off members of his own family? When you thought I was in love with Draco you threatened to kill him

in his bed. Do you think I don't know who you're hinting at now? He would kill you first and he'd do it gladly and you know it. You don't scare me, Lucius. In fact, I find you rather nauseating. Your touch makes my skin crawl and leaves me feeling in need of soap and water. In short, go to hell. You're disgusting. Leave my friends alone.

Sara

Dumbledore smiled, "Couldn't have said it better myself."

"She certainly let him know how she felt." Harry agreed, allowing himself a small smile of relief and pride. She had stood up to him and never showed a bit of fear. He read the words a second time. "He threatened to kill me. That's what this is about."

"That's the impression I got as well."

"And he wrote on the back; *You insist on this nonsense ceaselessly! Did you think this paragraph of insults would change my mind? I stand by what I said. Doubting my conviction will only result in headlines of unprecedented magnitude. However, I'm not fooled by your abrasive words. What girl sets herself so high and gambles with her heart's desire? You're stalling. Do not test my patience, Sara. I'll soon resort to more drastic measures.*"

"Well, I'd say he definitely threatened to kill you." The old wizard sighed and rested his brow on his hand for a moment, then stroked his beard. "We could have done something about this. She should have told me."

"He should be arrested." Harry said, packing the letters back in the box in slow motion. "He threatened to kill two people and he was terrorizing a teenaged girl, not to mention he's a psycho and a Deatheater to begin with."

"I agree." He said and stood. "I'll speak to the Ministry. In the meantime, I suggest you get up for awhile. I'll arrange for your dinner to be brought up."

"Professor, whatever you do, don't let them take the letters."

"Good thinking, Harry." He smiled. "You know, there was a reason I came to see you. Something I planned to ask you yesterday. Have you made any plans for employment or schooling?"

"No, sir."

"Harry, I want you to remain at Hogwarts. Become my apprentice for a year or two."

He looked up in surprise and smiled through his anguish. "There's nothing I want more, sir. It would be an honor."

"Also, there's the matter of Defense Against the Dark Arts. The fellow they sent to fill in has gone back to his regular job and we are left without a teacher once again. Tell me, would you be interested in filling the position?"

"I can't teach, sir! I was a student all the way up until yesterday!"

"And now you're the highest level of wizard under the name of Merlin, Harry. Who else do you know that has come face-to-face with Voldemort several times and walked away the victor? Show me a wizard better qualified and I'll show him to his office." He half-smiled. "Besides, you know the history. Our Professors of the Dark Arts have fallen to corruption more than once. Hogwarts could use someone like you. And, I have a feeling you'd be an excellent teacher, *Professor Potter*, and someone of your stature would require an excellent paycheck."

"It does have a nice ring to it." Harry sighed. "Thank you, sir. I accept."

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"Splendid! Now I must be off. I'll return soon."

Harry went to shower, sick over her plight, wishing she'd said something, but understanding why she hadn't. He'd come to know all about Sara, the way she reacted and how she made her choices. He held nothing against her, but he was hurt and maybe a little angry.

The hot water did nothing to comfort him. He closed his eyes as it rained down on him and thought of their house standing empty atop the cliff, waiting for those who had never arrived. His mind wandered to the white rose he'd given her. He'd thought of her the moment he'd seen it in the greenhouse and remembered it during one of his miserable wakeful periods earlier in the day. She'd taken it. The vase stood on the stand where she'd placed it, still containing it's little bit of water, but no trace of the flower remained.

He didn't know what it meant, that she'd taken the rose, but it told him something in light of the letters. She didn't want to leave. He was sure of it.

He shut the water off and crossed the room for his robe. As he tied it closed, he noticed Sara's robe still hung on it's hook, a painful reminder, and he ran a hand over it's length. Purple terrycloth, thick and soft against his skin. He remembered the last time he'd seen her in it, last Sunday morning as he made tea for them. She'd come into the kitchen and sat on the counter, her legs dangling over the edge, and how she'd *smiled* at him. *Come here, Harry.* She'd said, *The tea can wait.*

There was something in the pocket. It felt dishonest, going through her things, but he went about retrieving it and was surprised to find another letter from Lucius Malfoy hidden there. He opened it at once, read it through, and finally understood. He'd given her a deadline and she'd acted to protect him. But how? What had she done? Harry shook his head, not knowing what to think. Would Sara really sleep with Lucius Malfoy in an effort to save his life? It seemed to be his only demand.

He put his pajamas back on and went to the bedroom, where he poured himself a drink from the decanter near the fire. The warmth in his stomach as he drank it countered the chill that ran through his veins, and mellowed the anger that festered within him. He wanted to get on the Mach 2 and fly full speed all the way to Malfoy Manor. Blow the front door off it's hinges and obliterate Lucius in a rage totally unrestrained. He thought briefly about going, but knew if he did he'd kill Draco's father and

spend the rest of his life in Azkaban for it. Helplessness consumed him and he fell onto the couch with his drink, the letter clutched in his hand.

His dinner came and he dismissed the elf quickly. He had no intentions of eating any of it. The thought of food made his stomach ill at ease. What he wanted was to get up and smash something. He tortured himself with thoughts of Lucius Malfoy touching Sara, the way he had the night they'd rescued Draco. His blood boiled as the imagery progressed and his anger mounted. Sara must have felt cornered, like there was nothing else she could do. If she told anyone, he'd threatened to kill Draco as well. Harry sighed and took a sip of rum. She must have felt terribly alone in all this, knowing the fate of two people rested on her shoulders. And she loved Draco, he knew she did. But he no longer felt threatened by their friendship, even after learning of the kiss at the Yule Ball. Sara had a strange bond with Draco, but it was on a different level. And he trusted her implicitly.

He read the letter again and again, finally putting on his spring cloak and going to the landing outside the door to retrieve his broom. Lucius Malfoy would pay for what he'd done, even if it meant Azkaban for Harry. He didn't care what became of him, as long as he had his vengeance first.

He came face to face with Dumbledore and Snape, standing on the other side of the door, hand still poised to knock. Harry shoved the letter in Dumbledore's wrinkled hand, shot Snape a vicious glance, and gripped his broom. He headed toward the roof with it, but was stopped by Snape, who grabbed his arm and spun him around. "Where do you think *you're* going?"

"He went too far." Harry told him, "He left her no choice. Now he's left me none as well."

Snape thought Harry was delirious. His voice was too high, unsteady. He kept expecting the boy to burst into tears, but he didn't. "And what do you propose to do about it at this time of night and in your condition? Sit down, Potter. It's not as you think."

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"Yes Harry. Please sit." Dumbledore said, finished reading the letter, moving to the new sofa before the fire, the page dangling from his hand. "Before you run off there's something you need to know. Harry, Lucius Malfoy is dead."

Harry was dumbfounded. "But...but *who*..."

Snape, who had appeared lost in thought until now, looked Harry in the eye and spoke, his voice a confessional. "It was Sara." He said, "Lucius was poisoned. She came to me a week ago and asked for Belladonna and it's antidote. I thought nothing of giving it to her of course, how would I know?"

"*Belladonna*. He calls her that several times in the letters." Harry said, considering this new information as he sat beside Dumbledore and Snape stood before the fire.

"What I think," Snape added, "is that she mixed the poison in wine and used the antidote to allow her to drink it. Lucius would never drink it unless she did first."

"So she killed him. Even in the end she wouldn't give him what he wanted. Harry smiled and stood to remove his cloak. It was a warm night and the fire was too high to be wearing so many layers.

"Were you really going to kill Lucius in silk pajamas? Dirty ones at that? And barefoot of all things? Headmaster, I think Potter should spend a few days at St. Mungo's before he gets himself hurt."

"Harry will be fine, Severus."

"That's more than I can say for you, *Snape*." Harry scowled and stood, "*Everything* goes back to you.

First you let her leave without a word to anyone and now you've provided her with the means to commit murder! We had an engagement today unless you forgot. And I think it's time we got to it." He drew his wand and motioned toward the roof. "

Snape pulled his own wand and nodded. "Fine, but I've waited more than a year for this day. I'm willing to wait until you've come to your senses. I'll take no pleasure in killing you while you're wearing pajamas."

"A duel, is it?" Dumbledore rose to his feet. "As fun as that might be to watch, I'm afraid I need my teachers in one piece. Put your wands away, both of you."

"Yes, I forgot." Snape said as he stowed the wand, "Congratulations on your new employment. I swear, the list of Dark Arts teachers grows more and more odd every year. From traitors to imposters, a werewolf, and now our most famous *weasel*."

"You're just jealous, Snape, and I know why. Don't dwell on it. You belong in the dungeons."

"*Enough!*" Dumbledore raised his voice, stopping them dead. "You *will not* antagonize each other into another round of *defense lessons*! Now, let's all sit back down and resume our discussion."

They did, Snape opting to stand before the fire again over sharing the couch with Harry.

"What if they find her, Professor? They'll put her in Azkaban."

Snape's face went white. Obviously, the thought hadn't crossed his mind.

"They won't, Harry. They can't."

"What do you mean?"

"Azkaban is a place of desperation and apathy, remember. The Elemental's emotions are a dangerous thing when taken to an extreme. She would level the place."

"I never thought of that. Of course."

"In fact, Sara is governed by a different code than the rest of us. You see, the Elemental has many constants as I've mentioned before. She can be counted on to be good natured and mild. She is also unique and has a strong drive to protect herself at all costs. Therefore, Sara is allowed to use any means she deems necessary to eliminate any threat to her person. There will be no repercussions."

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Harry thought a weight had been lifted off his heart, but he felt no better. He found his glass still resting on the end-table, next to the decanter, and he refilled it. This was met with no opposition, but

then it wouldn't be, would it? He wasn't a student anymore, in fact he was a Hogwarts professor on the same level with Snape and as a first class wizard, he out-ranked him. The realization should have brought him great pleasure, but Harry slunk down in the cushions with his drink, wondering how Sara was at this hour, after her long ordeal he hoped she was resting, and that she was thinking of him, too. "Harry?" Dumbledore inquired, seeing the change in his expression. "Why would Sara leave a white rose on the body? Does it mean anything to you?"

Harry snapped to attention. "A white rose?" He swallowed, wondering what it meant. "I gave her the rose last night. She took it with her."

"Hmmm." The old man stroked his beard, "A message. She wanted you to know I think."

"Maybe. Maybe she just decided to leave it." He hesitated, "Do you know who found him?"

Snape answered. "It was Draco." He turned his back on the couch and lowered his head. "He was detained by the Ministry until the headmaster vouched for his whereabouts at the time of the murder. *Imagine*. As if he hasn't been through enough already."

Harry felt little pity for Malfoy. His thoughts were only of Sara. Lucius deserved to die in his opinion and was glad she'd done it, though he knew how it must have affected her. Somewhere tonight, it was raining. Harry's voice was barely a whisper as he stared into his empty glass. "I want to be alone." He said.

Snape moved without hesitation toward the door, but Dumbledore had something more to say. "All I ask is that you not leave the school unless you tell someone where you're going. At least for a few days."

"Yes, sir."

"Would you like Severus to bring you something to help you sleep?"

"I'll be fine." He said, though neither present thought Harry was *fine*. On the contrary, he looked on the verge of a complete mental breakdown.

"Rest yourself, Harry. Morning will bring a new day."

"Yes, sir."

As soon as they were gone, Harry crawled into bed, wishing the dull ache in his chest would subside. He laid there, silent for awhile, a thousand questions flashed through his mind, all in need of answers. He wondered where she was, what she was doing, how she felt. Did she miss him? Did she have regrets?

His eyes happened on the book she'd left for him, *Celestira*, and he opened it. It was ancient, and written in Old Romanian. He used a translation charm and soon was reading the text in English. It was a book about Elementals. In fact, the title of the book had changed to the more recent word.

Insight Dumbledore claimed was to be found in its pages. "We'll see." He said and turned to page one.

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18. A Veil of Tears

Draco,

I seems your letter came just a little too late. The Headmaster and I found the box where you said it would be, and all I can say is that I wish I had known sooner. I don't know what good it would have done, for I was on my way to kill him myself when the news came. However, I'm sorry about your loss. You know she never meant to hurt you.

I really don't know what to say. I feel I should speak on Sara's behalf, but how could I? She's gone, you know. She left me, left all of us in fact, without a word or indication. She told only Snape and he foolishly kept her secret. What is it about Sara that seems to have such an effect on Slytherins?

Between you and Snape, I don't know who is more easily persuaded. Sometimes, Malfoy, keeping your word is the wrong thing to do. Sara's silence is what brought us to this.

Sara has asked that no one write to her. Try if you want, but I sent Hedwig out yesterday evening and she hasn't come back. I think Sara left Great Britain. The locaters we got for Christmas say she's

"Traveling". Don't blame her for this, Draco. She did what she had to do.

If you know anything else that may help shed some light, please send an owl.

HP

Harry folded the parchment, sealed the envelope, and took it to the owlry. He'd written to Malfoy on the stationery Sara had ordered for the cottage. With help from Ron and Hermione, they had created a crest for the future Potter household. It was the shape of his scar dividing the Gryffindor scarlet and gold. He had objected at first, until Sara explained that the complex symbol on her spell book was the old symbol for Elemental. The more current one was a lightning bolt.

The memory twisted something in his chest and he walked with his head down. We're meant for each other. He thought, Could it be more obvious? How many people coincidentally have matching symbols?

He didn't know why he'd used the stationary. He'd even searched through his trunk for it when there was plain paper right out on the desk. Perhaps he'd just wanted to send expensive parchment, but maybe he wanted Malfoy to understand that he'd lost something dear to him, too.

He watched the owl fly off with it in the dark. The night was warm and clear, a gentle breeze blowing in off the lake. He stood just outside the door, barefoot on the carpet and still wearing the rumpled black pajamas. His hair was a shock of tangles, his eyes sunken and dark beneath his glasses. Harry suddenly longed to be on his broom, roaming freely through the night sky amid the stars. He needed to feel fresh air on his skin, let it whip through his hair as he pushed the Mach 2 to its limits. He returned to the tower at once.

With a light robe over his silk pajamas and sneakers on sock-less feet, Harry shouldered his backpack and glanced over to make sure the note was still propped on the table. It was there. It said only "I'll be back later."

Gracefully he kicked off and took to the air, heading south at nearly the speed of sound, the wind stinging his eyes even behind his glasses. Harry pushed the broom harder, willing it to carry him faster.

* * *

"I'm glad you're awake." Mr. Sanders said when she'd opened her eyes. He sat in the chair by the bed, wondering what to do if she didn't wake up. "You've been out for a long time."

"How long?" Her voice was parched, her head heavy.

"Damn near 24 hours. I've never seen anyone sleep that long who wasn't in a coma. Sara, are you sick? If you are you need to tell me."

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"Not in the way you think." Tears fell from her eyes at the very thought of Harry. "My heart is sick. And my mind is sick as well. Don't worry over me, Greg. All I need is time."

"You're crying again."

"I'll be doing a lot of that the next few days. After that I can't say one way or the other."

"But what am I supposed to do? What if you hadn't woke up? Sara, I'm driving blind here."

"If there ever comes a time when contacting someone is your only option, send a letter to Severus Snape. Instruct Topenga to deliver it to the school."

"Certainly." He hesitated, "Are you hungry? I could get room service for you."

"I'm not hungry." She whispered, clutching a linen handkerchief on the pillow. "Could you find me a Coke or a Pepsi? I'm so thirsty."

"You've had nothing to drink for a full day, unless you count that rocket fuel you were drinking when you found me. You're dehydrated." He went to the little refrigerator and found her a soda. He handed her the plastic bottle without thought of a glass, but she didn't seem to mind. Etiquette was the last thing on her mind.

Sara set the drink aside and rolled over to face the glass doors to the little balcony. "Open the drapes." She said.

Sanders did as she asked, then stood there, wondering what to do next.

"Open the door, Greg. Let the night in."

When the door was open and she'd smiled the tiniest bit, she forgot he was there. The lights mysteriously shut themselves off and Sara settled in, her arms around a fluffy pillow, squeezing it against her chest like a big teddy bear, her knees drawn up around it. She didn't move, yet the clock radio came on and flipped through the stations until it stopped on a classical piece he remembered from high school music class. Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. And if he could pick a more perfect backdrop to the night as viewed from this room, he didn't know it.

"Call me if you need anything. The phone's right there on the stand."

She didn't reply. She seemed lost in the music.

* * *

Feeling invincible as he often did when he flew, Harry slowed and stood up on the handle of his broom, arms outstretched, riding it like a skateboard. He had only ever done this close to the ground and if he fell now there's no way he would live through it, but he didn't care. He let his eyes slip closed as the light breeze ruffled his hair, his robe billowing out behind him. The anger inside him ebbed and dissolved, leaving him in a moment of peace high above the world. He opened his eyes and watched the stars for a moment, then without hesitation, stepped off the broom.

He almost panicked in the fraction of a second he spent free-falling, then his hands found the broom as they always did, and he used the momentum to swing gracefully into a standard riding position.

Harry saw at last his destination in the distance. The ocean fell away on his right as he descended toward it, not knowing why he had come here or what he hoped to accomplish. He didn't really expect her to be there, but maybe she had been. Maybe she left behind some clue for him to find. Some trace of her. A letter. Harry was hopeful, but didn't expect much.

He landed on Sara's beloved patio, admiring the beautiful Italian tiles in the harsh overhead security light, taking in the enormous fire-pit Sara called "the grill". All the new furniture was out, arranged as if the people who lived here might come out for breakfast in the morning. An image rose in his mind, concocted for no other reason than to torture him. Sara, wearing her fuzzy purple robe, laughing in the sunshine, a salty breeze stirring her hair as they sat in these chairs at this table. He ran his hand across the colorful cushions, wishing she was there with him.

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There were large stone pillars every few feet which held fire for light and with a wave of his wand they ignited, casting strange shadows and coating everything in an amber glow. Digging the keys out of his bag, he let himself in and dropped the pack on the kitchen counter. There was soda here he knew, a lot of it, and he got one out of the fridge, carrying it with him as he wandered the rooms. He lit the fireplaces, even though the temperature was quite comfortable already. Something had to fill the emptiness, the silence that encompassed him.

His hand happened over an ornamental crystal ball, which they had bought together in a muggle curiosity shop in London during Christmas Holiday. The memories came quick and each one stabbed him like a knife deep in his chest.

Suddenly he flung the glass ball hard to the floor, anger consuming him as he cursed her aloud. He

cursed Lucius Malfoy, he cursed himself. He sent chunks of jagged glass scattering across the room on the toe of his sneaker. He found the metal base in the mess and sent it flying into a large mirror in the dining room, shattering it, too. Satisfied, his breathing slowed and he began to feel rationality slipping back.

"What am I doing here?" He asked himself. "I've gone mad." He paced the living room, stepping carelessly over razors of glass, the fire warming the room a little too much, his eyes on the soft purple sofa where he had sat with Sara just six months ago, discussing their plans for yesterday. She'd tried to tell him then, he realized. Every word she'd said was a warning and he hadn't listened to her. Passed her off as nervous and over-dramatic. No, it was safe to say he hadn't taken her seriously at all. And what she'd said about the house came back to him.

"...I'll do it myself if it comes to that, even if it's nothing more than a monument to broken dreams..." So that's what she'd meant with the envelope full of money. She wanted him to build the house. He considered this for a few moments, then decided he couldn't and hastily left, extinguishing the fires on his way out.

* * *

Sara turned off the bathroom light and wandered back to the bed. She considered getting in, but her worry over Harry and her anxiety over the discovery of Lucius' body left her restless. She was sure he'd been found by now. Maybe even by Draco.

She hoped he'd found the ring she left and hoped he understood why she'd decided not to keep it. It was an apology, for the most part, and an acknowledgment, conceding the fact that she no longer deserved his thanks, his love, or his friendship. Tears coursed down her pale face, her eyes red and sunken, her hair tousled and pulled back. She half expected the raven to be waiting on the rail when she emerged onto the claustrophobic balcony, but there was no sign of it. She would probably never see it again and the knowledge only made her anxious. Killing Lucius was supposed to free her from such desperate misery, but she'd only replaced it with something much, much worse. Something darker than threats and unwelcome desires. Knowing the hatred Draco would have for her was painful, but walking away from Harry was excruciating. She felt the loss in every fiber of her being. She dreamed of him, and of running away. She was trying to get to him but couldn't and when she finally found him he pretended he did not know who she was.

It was this dream which had awakened her. She didn't know if she could sleep again anytime soon, but she preferred it to the hell of this waking reality. Sara didn't want to feel. She wanted Harry in the worst way. Wanted him close to her, his arms around her. It was maddening, the urge to go back, to run to him and beg forgiveness.

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She couldn't. She had chosen a path and now must follow it or risk everything she loved in her life. Sara cried shamelessly to the night sky, holding her hands out to the darkness, inviting the wind to wash over her, feeling a calmness in the frenzy that enveloped her, twisting around her body, lifting her hair and whisking her words away on a river of air and sound to the one who was so heavy on her mind. Her every thought was of him. She wondered how he was, alone and deserted on what should have been the happiest of days. Her guilt was overwhelming and she felt suddenly weak again. Sobbing, she made her way back to the bed and fell into it, crying into the pillows, not bothering with the blankets.

* * *

Harry was restless. His fast, furious flight back to Hogwarts should have left him feeling drained, but he was unable to sleep. He thought of Sara, of the anger he'd felt for her as he'd stood in the cottage. He didn't want to be angry with her. He wanted to see her more than he'd ever wanted anything as he stood on the roof of the tower, drinking a glass of watered down rum and watching the moon dance along the ripples on the lake. Two long, devastating days she'd been gone. Hedwig had still not returned and he could only wonder how far away Sara really was. He guessed she was in Europe somewhere, staying in a hotel and all alone with her conscious. He wondered if she missed him the way he missed her, desperately, as if his soul had been split in two and half of it lost. That part of him cried out for Sara and to deny it was agony.

There had been times he wanted to smash everything to pieces until his hands were bloody and the rage subsided. Other times he stayed in bed, lacking both the energy and the motivation to get up again. He'd locked the door and refused to answer it. Preferring the insistent knocks of Dumbledore, McGonagall, and Snape, to any sort of acknowledgement. They tried in vain to get him to eat, but he only played with the food with luck-luster disinterest. He couldn't eat. His stomach felt sick most of the time and he just didn't care.

Occasionally he played the stereo, reveling in the vast collection of heartrending music Sara owned. Harry found he could relate to the haunting melodies and sad lyrics, but mostly he just wanted to be alone with his misery and his thoughts.

He'd read most of Celestira between shallow slumbers and felt for Sara in a whole new way. He'd never known about the "constants" Dumbledore mentioned. What the Headmaster hadn't said was that the Elemental could easily be led to darkness like a curious child. That she was often overwhelmed by emotion when these "constants" interfered with her own beliefs and personality. That she is always kept under the watchful eyes of an adept "guardian" to keep her from being led astray. He'd also failed to mention that most Elementals eventually succumb to madness.

He now understood that there was a part of Sara that wanted to give in to Lucius, the curious child she'd inherited, and the strength of will she'd shown by killing him was more than worthy of the name

Gryffindor. It explained her fondness for Draco as well. The Heir of Darkness himself, struggling with his own morals and values. He would be irresistible to an Elemental, Harry supposed. And what about this guardian? Her parents had kept her safe, then Dumbledore and he himself. Who was watching over her now? Who would be there to save her from herself, from her own alien desires?

This troubled him deeply, that Sara was alone in the world, vulnerable, isolating herself from those who loved her, who vowed to protect her at all costs. He needed to find her, if only for a moment, to be sure she was alright. Harry hung his head in despair. He didn't even know where to look. Trying hard to swallow the lump in his throat, he returned to the bed they'd shared and pulled the covers over his head, burying his face in the pillow. He made no sound as the blankets shivered over his trembling form and a strong wind gusted in through the open doors. He heard her voice and sat up in the candlelight, letting it drift to his ears like a cure. The scent of her perfume, weak and barely there but heaven to his senses, mingled around the wretched sound of crying and her words were faint, but clear. He smiled as the tears ran down his face, choked by emotion and smiling though his exquisite pain.

* * *

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Snape ate his dinner in silence next to Dumbledore, who seemed troubled and distracted. He paid Minerva no mind as she entered the room and took her seat next to the Headmaster.

"He won't let me in." She sighed. "I think he threw something at the door."

"It's been a week." Dumbledore said, laying down his utensils. "Minerva, I'm at a loss in this situation. I have to admit, I don't know what to do."

Snape sneered. "Break down the door and drag him out of there! Enough of this non-sense already. At this point I'd have to say Potter is just looking for sympathy."

Dumbledore leveled his eyes at Snape. "If it was sympathy he was after, Severus, he would let us in."

"It's ridiculous! The way he sits up there, sniveling over a girl for a week like the world has come to an end."

"To him, it has."

"I thought only women acted that way."

"I beg your pardon, Severus?" McGonagall interjected.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. Just..." He swirled his fork in the air as he picked the perfect words, "just thinking aloud."

Dumbledore sighed heavily. "Someone has to talk to him."

"I'll do it." Snape stood, wiped his mouth, and threw the napkin down. "Poor Harry Potter..." he mumbled as he walked away and took to the stairs.

"Do you think we should go, Albus?"

"Considering I almost had to break up a duel on Sunday, I would have to say yes."

"Potter!" Snape yelled as he approached the door, "POTTER! Get up! Enough of this nonsense!" He hammered on the door, getting no response. "I SAID GET UP!!!"

Again there was no answer. He lifted his foot and kicked the door in, just as Dumbledore and McGonagall rounded the last stretch of stairs, floating on tiny rugs.

The door imploded, the locks tearing the frame and splintering the wood. Snape slammed it against the wall and he stormed into the parlor and made his way hastily to the bedroom with the others close behind.

Snape stopped short. The bed was gone, the whole thing, frame and all. Even one of the nightstands was missing. "What the..." He muttered, confused.

He moved to the doors and flung them open, making his way across the roof. There was the bed, situated almost perfectly in the center, facing out at the sky and Potter buried under the covers. Not even his head was visible. The stand was in its rightful place at Harry's left hand. At least a dozen dirty glasses crowded its surface and as he rounded the bed he noticed several empty bottles of Finnegan's Swill, which he secretly had a liking for, littered the stone floor, along with half eaten bowls of food and the crystal decanter that once sat beside the couch. It too, was empty and discarded. "Wake up, Potter." Snape commanded, the edge having left his voice. "Get out of bed. Life still exists outside these walls."

Dumbledore and McGonagall had reached the bed and were staring down at it in confusion, much like Snape had done.

"Go away." Came a shaky voice from under the covers.

"I will not!" He insisted. "Get up or I'll drag you out."

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Minerva held up a hand to quiet Snape and sat on the bed, gently touching Harry's shoulder. "Harry?" she asked in a soft, comforting voice, "We're worried about you."

"Who's worried?" Snape spat, "If you ask me,-"

"No one asked you!" Her voice was sharp and cautionary, then went back to the hushed tones one would use with a distressed child. "Harry, you must leave this bed. Get dressed, come down to dinner."

"I can't." He whispered. "Just leave me alone, Professor. Please leave me alone."

"Oh for Heaven's sake!" Snape bellowed and yanked back the blankets. Harry clung to them, stopping Snape's effort just below the elbow.

"Please tell me those aren't the same pajamas." Snape scowled, "How perfectly disgusting!"

"Thank you, Severus!" Dumbledore said, looking less than happy, "That will be all. Please return to

your dinner."

Snape dropped the coverlet, nodded obediently to the Headmaster, and stalked off without another word.

Harry lay as he was, trying to duck back under the blankets, but Dumbledore stayed his hand, taking a seat beside Minerva. Harry closed his eyes to the bright glare of the evening sun and his head shone with perspiration from the heat of late spring. His hair was matted to his head in places, sticking up in others, dull and unwashed.

Dumbledore said nothing, his hand over Harry's, wishing he had even a bit of wisdom that would help cheer his apprentice. Harry kept his back to them, hiding his red rimmed, bloodshot eyes in their dark sockets, his pallor, and his misery. His voice was raspy, thick with sleep and dehydration. "She whispers on the wind, Professor." He managed. "She sings to me. It's faint and sometimes I can't even make out the words, but I hear her."

"Is that why you put the bed on the roof?"

"Yes."

"Good thinking, Harry." He gave his hand a gentle pat. "But I'm afraid it's time for you to get out of bed. It's not good for you to be alone all the time. Besides," he looked down at the dozen or so unopened envelopes and the terribly rumpled boy, who undoubtedly looked better than he felt, "someone needs to answer all these letters before Mr. Weasley gets it in his head to come looking for you. You're friends want to know why you weren't on the train, I imagine. You have to tell them sometime."

"I can't." He whispered.

"Now those are two words I thought I would never hear from you."

"She's not coming back, is she?"

"I don't know. What does your heart tell you?"

"That I'll never see her again."

"That, Harry, remains to be seen. Sometimes our hearts know only our greatest fears. And what would Sara think if she dropped onto the roof at this very moment? Think about this. Are you who you want to be when you see her again?"

"It doesn't matter, does it?"

Dumbledore bowed his head. He couldn't see his face, but he thought the boy might be crying. "I think it does, Mr. Potter. You smell like a cabbage." Dumbledore stood, gazing down at one of the most powerful wizards alive. "I'll wait for you in the Dining Hall. I left my dinner a little too soon I think."

* * *

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"Sara?" Greg whispered hesitantly, hoping she was awake for once. "You sleeping?"

"Yes." She whispered. "I'm not hungry."

"You sure? Five star chef! Smells pretty good if you ask me."

"You can have it."

Sanders placed the take out on the little dinette and crouched beside the bed to look her in the eye.

"Get up." He told her, his tone authoritative, "Get up right now or I'm writing to that guy. Take a shower, you'll feel better."

"I'll never feel better." she mumbled, her throat constricted, her voice raspy from crying. "Go away, Greg. Just leave me alone."

"I know that's his shirt Sara, but you've had it on for a week straight and I swear if I set you out in the sun I could fry an egg on your head. Don't make me dump a bucket of water on you."

"I know you mean well, but making sure I'm clean is not your responsibility." Sara was annoyed by his constant attempts to rouse her and firing him briefly crossed her mind. His bumpkin speech and unrefined manner were wearing on her nerves as well.

"No, but you're leaving me no other option than to write to that Snape guy."

"Do not bother him! He'd come on the fly. And for what? To get me to take a shower? Well I don't feel like it, okay? You don't understand!"

Fed up with her apathy and not knowing what else to do, he grabbed her around the middle and dragged her out of bed. She cursed him, crying again, and tried to push him away as he lifted her and walked to the bathroom.

Sara slid down the wall until she came to rest on the tile, crying and trying hard to stop as he adjusted the shower and pulled the curtain. When he turned and saw her there, crumpled on the floor with her zombie-like blue eyes running with tears, his heart almost broke. Her hair stuck to her head. Long black tresses that had once been soft, pretty blond curls hung in ratty tangles, dull and lifeless. He thought again of writing to the teacher, and he felt horrible over what he'd finally been driven to do.

"I'm sorry." He said, his voice hushed and full of sorrow. He knelt before her and wrapped his arms around her, helping her up off the floor. "Come on, honey. There's something I want you to see."

Sanders led her to the long mirror she had avoided for a week and made her look at her own reflection. He saw the horror in her expression, but it was quickly replaced with indifference and reluctant acceptance. "It's nothing compared to the inside." She said with her quiet, shaky voice. "I fear I shall never feel in color again."

"You will." He encouraged, "What's all black and white now won't last forever, even though we don't believe it sometimes. Now get in the shower. My Grandma always said 'water cleanses'. She's right, you know." He left her side and moved to the open door. "Give me the shirt. The hotel has a service.

I'll have it cleaned for you."

With a sigh Sara closed the door, removed the shirt, and kissed the collar before handing it out with a terrifying anxiety. She didn't want to part with such a beloved memory, but Mr. Sanders was right. She didn't want it ruined, either.

Sara stood before the mirror again, this time wearing a long terry robe with the hotel's monogram on the pocket, combing her hair and lost in thought. Greg had been right about the water. She felt awake, refreshed almost, and a little more solid. But she didn't know if she felt better.

A quick spell dried and styled her hair and Sara wandered back out to the bed. She stood next to it for several minutes, half of her wanting to sink down into it and never get back up. The other half wanting to go outside, to follow the warm rain of the shower with fresh air and gentle, calming breezes from the Mediterranean. It was warm, wherever they were, someplace in the south of France and the robe was heavy.

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Sara left the bedside and went to her luggage, digging through stacks of her favorite clothes, fine fabrics in pretty hues and every shade of purple. Looking at them brought back painful memories of happier times, before the darkness took the joy from her life. The green sweater she'd worn on St. Patrick's Day when Seamus had spiked the punch and they all got detention. The fuzzy pink sweater Hermione had looked fabulous in as they laughed and cheered their winning team at a November Quidditch match. Harry's favorite red dress that she'd worn to the Valentine's dance just to see him smile. Her fingers caressed the blue cashmere from her dinner at Angelo's in the Royal Wescott with Severus and her sad-eyed Harry. She knew he'd kissed Ginny the night of the Yule Ball, had divined it months before from touching Ron, but it was nothing to her. She knew who Harry loved. It was then that she decided she wouldn't wear these things again.

Quickly, she piled all of these into two suitcases, leaving only jeans and black clothing behind, along with her favorite midnight purple. The color of belladonna. She nearly choked on the thought and her mind turned to Draco. She pictured him, wandering his newly inherited manor, alone and walking the fine line between darkness and light with unsteady feet and disorder of mind. She closed her eyes and reached out to him, wanting to tell him all the things she felt, how she'd never meant to hurt him. She found him in bits and pieces. Images flashed behind her eyes, tattered thoughts of betrayal and vengeance echoed in her ears and she turned her mind away quickly, knowing further contact would send her back to the blankets and she didn't think she would be getting back up again. There was only one thing that kept her from falling headlong into oblivion. Something she'd sensed quite strongly. He was still wearing the Amidon.

She'd taken it off after leaving Lucius, but Sara searched through her backpack and found the Fortificus Charm. Her tears splashed on its smooth diamond surface as it lay on her hand. Draco's blood. Harry's blood. Swirled together like a pinwheel. She transfigured its gold chain into a delicate strip of black silk, like a cameo, and fastened it around her neck. Sara's eyes slipped shut as she savored the feel of their strengths, mingling together and coursing through her veins like a remedy. Her thoughts turned to the little box she'd seen in her bag. A gold square about the size of a credit card and a quarter of an inch thick. The top boasted a crimson and gold coat-of-arms, a lightning bolt down the middle, intense and imposing. She took it out and looked at it, studied the crest, watched as the dim light glinted off its surface. She opened the lid and stared at the gold replica of a muggle housekey, fitted in a bed of regal dark red velvet. She closed the box and wrapped her hand around it, wiping her tears with the other.

She stood and tossed on a flowing skirt and a halter from the all-black selection and threw a jet summer cloak around her shoulders, tying it in front and drawing the hood down to cast her eyes in shadow. The two suitcases and huge selection of garment bags she'd no longer be needing jumped easily into the backpack with a command and a wave of her hand. She slid it onto her arm and opened the gold box, hesitating only a moment before touching the port-key.

* * *

Harry slid silently into the chair across from Dumbledore, his eyes lowered, his manner detached and aloof. His hair was clean, sleek and shiny thanks to Hermione's enchanted comb, and parted over his scar of its own will. He wore Sara's favorite green sweater with a pair of old Saturday jeans. He was barefoot, Dumbledore noted, not a habit that belonged to Harry, but to the girl he missed.

"The elves will bring whatever you'd like. Why don't you give them a good challenge?"

"Whatever you have." He told the little elf who appeared at his side. "Something easy."

She hurried away and Harry studied his hands.

I spoke to our friend today. It's not easy to reach him where he is, but I finally caught him just after lunch. We were in complete agreement that this might be a good time for you to visit."

"I want to stay here, sir." Harry said in his hushed voice, "I'd never forgive myself if she returned to find me gone."

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"I wouldn't worry about that. I will be here to explain if the situation were to arise. And of course I would call you back at once."

"I don't want to leave."

"I know you don't, Harry. But I insist you go."

He hesitated, examining the ripples in a bowl of soup that was placed before him and watching as it was joined by bread, salad, and ambrosia, which appealed to him and his stomach erupted with a hunger so intense it nearly took hold of him. A hunger he didn't know he had. "Maybe in a few

weeks." he said and pulled the desert in front of him, "Don't make me leave Hogwarts right now, Professor. I'm sorry, but I won't do it."

"You can and you will." He raised an eyebrow and looked at Harry over his half-moon spectacles. "He'll arrive here late tonight to collect you for a few days and since I sent Severus to check on our young Mr. Malfoy, there should be no risk involved. Nothing lengthy, I promise you, just a little change of scenery."

"I don't want a change of scenery, sir." Harry had eaten most of the ambrosia in a few bites, but his appetite was beginning to taper off as his frustration and fear grew with every rebuttal.

"You feel closest to Sara in the tower, this I understand. Harry, I also know that surrounding yourself with painful memories will only bring you greater anguish. Go with Sirius. At the very least, humor an old man who asks of you only what is best."

Harry dropped his fork and toppled his chair as he hurried away from the table, walking as fast as he could without actually running, and fled through the side door. He went straight to his favorite bench by the lake and fell onto it. The moon had risen in a clear sky and Harry gazed up at the stars, his mind drifting back to a different moment in time, one that would never leave him as long as he lived. Sara with her crown of silver roses on the day she turned seventeen, dancing slow in a sparkling cloud, her blue eyes smiling up at him.

"Mind if I join ya Harry?"

Harry was startled out of his reverie by Hagrid, who towered above, waiting for an invitation.

"Not at all." Harry tried to smile and managed a pained expression.

"Professor Dumbledore told me about Sara." He said heavily as he settled in next to Harry, "I wouldn't worry over it. I have a feeling we'll be seein' her again."

"I hope you're right, Hagrid." Harry sniffled, "She was going to marry me."

Hagrid's oversized arm pulled him into an unexpected, but tremendously welcome hug and when he was finally released, Harry felt a little bit better. Comforted. He wiped quickly at his eyes and pretended to straighten his clothes.

"Harry, sometimes people just need to be on their own and it's got nothing to do with anyone else.

There's nothing to do but give 'em the space they need and go about your business. She'll come back, a'course. Why, she'd be a bloody fool not to!"

Harry gave a soft smile. "Thanks, Hagrid."

"It's true! Why just this past year every girl at Hogwarts was green with envy. But anyway, I understand your gettin' a visitor. Should be here in just a few hours if I've got my times right."

"Dumbledore is making me leave." Harry sighed. "He doesn't understand."

"That's where you're wrong. He understands, alright. And I'll tell you something else, Harry. He's more worried about you right now than he is about his niece. Don't hold it against him. He knows what's best."

"I know he means well, I just need some time."

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"That's somethin' you've got plenty of. Now you'd better get back inside, Professor. You've waited a long time to see old Padfoot again."

Harry sighed. "I think I'd just like to sit here awhile."

"Fine by me. I'll see ya later then." Hagrid took a few steps, then stopped. "Oh and Harry, cheer up.

That girl's crazy about you, whether you think so or not. You'll have to make the best of it 'till she sees fit to come back where she belongs."

* * *

Something glittered in the moonlight and Sara switched on the lamps to see what it was. Glass was everywhere. Jagged shards of what she guessed was the muggle crystal ball littered the hardwood floor and the carpet. She held out a shaky hand and whispered "Reparo."

A few steps into the dining room brought to light a similar scene. The large mirror that hung on the far wall was on the floor in a thousand pieces and she struggled to hold back her tears. She knew what sort of emotions had pushed Harry to smash things in their house and her guilt was overpowering. Her heart hammering away in her chest, she fixed the mirror and hurried to the bedroom, knowing he had been here and could return at any time.

She left the suitcases in the corner of the room and directed the garment bags to hang themselves in the closet. She placed her jewelry in a box on the dresser. She had no need of it, didn't want to look flashy and well-off. The only things she wore were the diamond ring on her left hand, the amethyst bracelet Harry sent her last summer, a thin gold anklet that had been her mother's, the locator and of course, the Fortificus Charm. These were the things she could not bear to part with.

With a longing she did not understand, Sara climbed onto the bed and laid down on the right side, unaware that the blood leaked onto the comforter from where she's stepped on broken glass with bare feet. She didn't cry as her head found the pillows, just stared up at the ceiling, wishing Harry was there next to her, wanting to tell him all the things she'd left unsaid. Her mind drifted back to their last night together and then the tears did come, fast and furious as she remembered the love she'd felt, the closeness. How she'd managed to leave him after that she'd never understand, but leaving had cast a veil of tears over her heart that could never be lifted until she once again felt his touch, heard his voice in her ear, whispering. He might hate me by then. She thought, He may hate me already.

The sobering thoughts brought her back to the present and Sara remembered her hotel room, somewhere in the south of France, wouldn't be vacant forever. Greg Sanders would return sooner or later and she needed to be there when he arrived.

Reluctantly, she got up off the bed and went to the kitchen, getting herself a bottle of soda from the refrigerator. She wandered onto her patio, the one Harry had been so angry about. Sara had never understood his desire to pay for half of everything, but she thought she did now. It was because love is a partnership, where both involved contributed equally and Harry had been trying to do his part. Snape's accusations were a minor reminder that kept him honest, but it was she who had been wrong. And Harry was wrong, too. Love was also about sharing.

She picked a rose from the small garden Mr. Sanders had planted and left it on what would have been Harry's pillow.

Digging some lipstick out of her bag, Sara went to the mirror in the dining room and drew a heart on the mirror she'd repaired. It was the only message she dared to leave.

There were tears in her eyes as she took a last look around and opened the little gold box. She touched the key and was instantly standing in the hotel room. Greg was knocking on the door as she arrived and she ran to let him in, not knowing how long he'd been there. He held Harry's shirt on a wire hanger and covered with clear plastic. She took the shirt.

"Get packed, Greg. We're leaving."

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He smiled approvingly and went to his room straight away. Sara had never unpacked, and her eyes landed on the take-out which sat untouched on the dinette. Feeling hungry for the first time in a week, she warmed it with a wave of her hand and sat down.

* * *

Harry sat in the bed on the roof, reading the letters different owls had dropped on him over the last few days, not wanting to answer any of them. He found the letter that had come with Hedwig two days ago, the same he had written, returned to him, unopened. Two words were scrawled on the back in shaky hand. "Please Don't." This he tore to shreds and sent the pieces into the wind.

Seamus had sent him a port-key for the new "distribution center" he'd set up in the Irish countryside and enclosed a letter urging him to come to work as soon as possible because orders were backed up. Apparently, he was able to find a way to sell into the muggle world and was hiring a few other people to help out. There was no longer a big tub of rum in a vacant room where Harry had spent many an evening ladling booze into a funnel, bottle by bottle. Seamus claimed he had concocted a vat and spout method that filled the bottles for them and all that was to be done was inspection, boxing, and order filling. Surprisingly, this sort of distraction almost appealed to him, but he would wait awhile longer before using the key. He wasn't ready to see normal, happy faces.

There were several from Ron and Hermione, written on stationary embossed with the image of their twin tattoos. The sight of it brought about feelings of jealousy of their happiness and a bitter reminder of his failure. The plans they made had come to fruition, his had not. His plans had taken a wrong turn somewhere.

There were four of them and he sighed as he read. The first was addressed to Harry and Sara, which he found depressing.

Hi guys,

Is everything alright? We were worried when you didn't get on the train. Did something happen? Let us know as soon as possible.

Our apartment is great! The only problem is that we have to keep separate rooms because my parents keep dropping by and I have them convinced Ron and I are simply sharing costs. At least I think I have them convinced. Anyway, if we go up to the roof we can see Big Ben and Diagon Alley is only a ten minute walk. You have to come and visit! The Phantom is awesome! Ron and I went last night and they were having 2-for-1 shots. We ran into Seamus and Susan and he's hired Ron to fill orders. Ron likes it because it pays really well and he can do it whenever he wants, basically. He has nothing to do until his classes start in September, anyway. I start my job on Monday. I almost forgot, Seamus asked that you contact him.

We're meeting Ginny and Justin for lunch, so let us know what's going on?

Hope to hear from you soon.

Hermione & Ron

The next was more of the same, only more insistent, and Ron had even added his own thoughts at the bottom. This letter began:

Harry, what the hell's going on? Since when don't you answer our letters? Is Sara alright? She's our friend, too you know, and if she's sick or something we have the right to know. PLEASE write back!

Then there was the third, threatening letter.

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It's Wednesday and this is getting a little scary. If we don't hear back from you by morning we're going straight to Dumbledore...

And what else would this evening's letter say, having only just arrived as he'd sat down?

Harry, we're so sorry. No wonder you haven't answered! We can only imagine how you feel, but you have friends who are here for you if you need us...

Sympathy from Ron and Hermione only made him feel worse and he put the letter aside without reading the rest. He knew what it said, and he knew they were well-meaning, but he just couldn't deal with sympathy right now. His thoughts were on Sara and he raised the locator, which he wore on his wrist like a watch. His heart nearly jumped out of his chest and he leapt from the bed, tearing through the rooms before he realized what it meant. Her arm pointed to "home", but it didn't mean Hogwarts. He ran to his backpack and dug out the port-key, but by the time he held it in his hand, the indicator was slowly moving back to "traveling".

His heart sank and he knew she was gone. He'd missed his chance and could only hope she'd go back again. The excitement and hope he'd felt in those few frantic, elated moments turned to desperation and a sad acceptance.

He carried the gold box to the desk and found their special stationary. Once he had it in his hand, he opened the lid and touched the key.

Harry stood before the mirror, looking at her message, a smile on his face. She still loved him, he realized, and she'd wanted him to know. Some of the horrible anguish left him as he stared at the heart she'd drawn and Harry moved to the desk in the next room, returning with a black magic marker. He drew a second heart, overlapping hers, and smiled again. There was relief in this small gesture.

Immense relief.

He sat down at the table with the stationary and a ball-point pen. He wrote a short question, something he needed to ask her, and left it there, out where she would see it if she happened to return here again. He wandered the other rooms, finding little evidence of her visit. Another soda was missing from the fridge and he took the third of twelve. The crystal ball, which held no magic power, was resurrected on the little stand in the living room, a spattering of red somewhere in the middle of it. An impurity he had never noticed before. It was now that he noticed the tiny flecks of blood that showed her steps from the front door. She'd cut herself of course, on the mess of broken glass he'd so carelessly left behind. Harry followed her path to the bedroom.

He was puzzled by the luggage in the corner. He pulled it open one piece at a time, but it was only her clothes. Most of her clothes, actually, and he wondered why she would discard them like this.

Wouldn't she need them? But of course, all the darkest colors were missing. Sara had a lot of black clothing and none of it was here. It occurred to him that she was dressing for a funeral every day, choosing the only color that could truly reflect what she was feeling on the inside.

Dismayed as he was by this idea, the white rose on the pillow pulled his heart in a different direction. Her side of the bed was slightly mussed and some drops of blood stained the lavender spread near the foot, meaning she had lain here recently, thinking of him, of their last night together. He lifted the rose and held it as he lowered himself to the covers, thinking of her, too, sinking into the memory the way he had a hundred times already. He stared up at the ceiling, wondering what her answer would be.

* * *

"Hello Harry."

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Harry spun around, the key having returned him to the desk, and smiled when he saw Sirius emerge from the shadows.

"Sorry I'm late." Harry stood and crossed the room to shake his hand. "Sara was at our house. I tried to get there in time, but I missed her."

"What was she doing there? Why wouldn't she wait for you?" Sirius removed his cloak and sat with his godson by the fire.

"She brought some of her things there."

"What do you think it means?"

"That she still considers it home."

Sirius smiled as he saw the expression in Harry's eyes. Pained, yes, but there was relief there and solace. This was not the apathetic young man Dumbledore had described, hiding from the world and lost in misery. Whatever Harry had found at the cottage had renewed his spirit, given him hope.

"You look good, Sirius. Long hair suits you."

"Thanks. And look at you, Harry. Six feet tall I'd guess."

"Almost."

"Dumbledore says he gave you Moony's old job. Congratulations, you're the youngest Hogwarts professor in history."

"Thanks, but did he tell you about the Order of Merlin?"

"It was his proudest moment, I think, presenting you to the Elders. And yet another first for you. The youngest wizard ever inducted. I hear they wanted to change the rules so they could do it sooner. I wish I could have been there to see it."

"Me, too. At least Sara was here for it. I'm sorry you never got to meet her."

"I knew her mother, as you know. Her father, too, but not as well. If she's anything like Diana I'm the one who should be sorry."

Harry poured them both some Finnegan's Swill and relaxed against the back of the sofa. "What was she like, Sara's mother? All I know was that she sang very well and had a soft-spot for the wayward Slytherin, which is exactly like Sara. She took a liking to Draco Malfoy and the two of them are friends. Well, she's friends with him and he's madly in love with her."

"Reminds me of someone we know." Sirius grinned, "How is old Sevvie?"

"He kicked the door in earlier. I'm going to kill him someday I think, that is if our duel stops getting post-poned."

"Don't hurt him too badly. He's always tried to be intimidating, but it just ends up being funny. God, how we used to laugh at him! He'd get so mad his face would turn red and Remus would do a countdown to when his head would explode." Sirius laughed with the memory, "Severus adored Diana, and their relationship was much like the one you described between Sara and the Malfoy kid. One sided, but she did care about him. We never understood it.

What I have never told anyone was that I had a crush on Diana in fifth year. Nothing ever came of it, of course, but there was something that just drew people to her. She was a happy spirit, had an

infectious laugh, but she was demure in a way. Not a wallflower, but never the life of the party, either. When she sang and played the piano even the Slytherins would stay and watch, but she never let it go to her head. Everyone liked her."

"Then you do know Sara in a way. Before all the trouble started she was exactly like that, except she was afraid to sing in front of people. She did it only a few times, but she was phenomenal. She's the only one who didn't think so."

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"It's different for her. She's an Elemental and that's her emotional outlet. Harry, don't you know that her most inner feelings are transferred to the music, affecting any and all who hear? Don't feel bad. I didn't know either. The Headmaster told me just this afternoon."

"I always said her music cast a spell. I guess that wasn't far off."

Sirius lifted a frame from the coffee table and studied the muggle photograph. Harry and Sara stood on the front steps of a house, champagne in hand, the bottle slung around the girl's shoulder with the rest of Harry's arm. They smiled brilliantly back at him and Sirius's voice took on a softer tone. "Is this your house?"

Harry's eyes grew depressed. "Yes. The day we furnished it. It was just before Christmas."

Sirius laid it face-down and tried to smile. "We should be off soon, Harry. Dumbledore won't be up to see us off."

"Is he upset with me?" Harry wondered, feeling suddenly very guilty, "I gave him a hard time earlier."

"He's not upset, just thought it would be best I suppose. Are you packed for a few days?"

"Yes, but I didn't really know what to bring. He didn't say where we were going."

"Nowhere special. There's a little island off the coast of Scotland that I have the use of. No people for miles. I thought we could just hang out for awhile."

Harry breathed relief. He didn't want to see anyone and Sirius' company was like a big band-aid. He felt better just talking to him these few minutes and as much as he hated to leave Sara's tower, a little time away with Sirius seemed a welcome idea. "Let's go then." He said, "I hope you have a fast broom."

"Always."

Sirius took the lead when they left the roof, but Harry had stopped to hover for a moment, looking back at the rooms, the open doors, and the bed on the roof, his heart hammering in his chest, suddenly terrified she would come home while he was gone and he will have missed her again. Sirius was at his side, he realized, and an arm went around his shoulders. "Come on, Harry. It's time to go."

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19. Sulking with the Enemy

The days passed quickly for Harry. He was enjoying Sirius' company and the two of them fished together every morning off the long dock, went out in the little boat after lunch, and spent the evenings sitting together on the porch of a small cabin, drinking Finnegan's Swill and catching up. It was the evenings that Harry liked best and he'd even been given over to laughter a few times, unable to help himself, the most acute of his misery slipping away.

They spent a week on the island. Harry checked the locator frequently, but it always said the same thing, Sara was "*traveling*", Hermione and Ron were usually either "*home*", "*drinking*" or "*snogging*", and he was "*on holiday*". He kept the port-key in his pocket, just in case.

He'd been tempted to use it many, many times, but restrained himself. He would not drive himself mad going back there every few hours, just to see if she'd answered his note. It could be months before she went back, or not at all. He could not allow it to become an obsession or it could cost him his sanity.

Dumbledore was on the roof when they landed, stretched out on a chaise lounge, looking through last month's copy of *Witch Weekly*, left behind by Sara and Hermione. He was on the cover, to his dismay, wearing his Quidditch gear for the last time and holding the Quidditch Cup. He made up his mind to have a few words with Colin Creevey about selling his image, but did he really mind? He decided it wasn't important. *Everyone* wanted to make money doing what they most loved to do.

Dumbledore smiled over the magazine, but did not put it down.

"Do you find that trash interesting, Professor?"

"Did you know Harry, that according to this, you are heavily weighing the decision to play Quidditch for England? That's news to me."

"It's news to me, too. I never even considered it. I told you it was trash."

"Then it goes into a long story about Draco Malfoy and most of the pictures are of him." Dumbledore smiled, quickly thumbing past a picture of Harry and Sara alongside Ron and Hermione in London, the same picture that hung on the wall inside the tower.

Harry laughed, "I'm so glad I'm not blond and rich."

To this Dumbledore laughed as well. "Yes, what a curse *that* would be." He closed the magazine and set it aside. "I trust you and your friend had a satisfactory time?"

"It was great!" Harry grinned. "It was what I think camping must be like. I'd never been fishing before and I caught the most *bizarre* creatures. We threw them all back, of course. Sirius wanted to eat his, but I talked him out of it."

"What else would jump on a wizard's hook, but magic fish?"

Harry smiled. He was filthy, having helped restock the wood supply and clear out the fireplace, and wanted badly to get in the shower and change clothes. "I'd better get cleaned up." He said.

"Just a moment." Dumbledore lowered his voice, "I asked that you return today because an invitation

came for you. It's from Draco Malfoy." He withdrew a folded note from his pocket and handed it to Harry. "He would like to meet you tonight in London. If you choose to go I was able to procure one of the Ministry's flats for your use."

Harry read the note.

Potter,

I want to talk to you. Meet me at The Phantom Friday night, and don't dress like an idiot.

DM

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Knowing that Malfoy could very well have important information about Sara, he made his decision at once. "How do I get to London, sir?"

"You can get a port-key in Hogsmead. I don't suppose you'd use the floo network and risk offending Mr. Malfoy with *sooty attire*."

"Never." Harry smiled. "Hogsmead it is then. Will I see you before I leave?"

"I will wait for you. I was enjoying this article immensely. Did you know Draco had the highest grades at Hogwarts?"

"No."

Dumbledore smiled, "Neither did I."

The second he was dressed and his hair was combed, Harry opened the little gold box. He had been waiting for this moment for seven full days and could wait no longer. If he came up empty, he promised himself he would wait another week before trying again.

Instantly he stood just inside the front door, immediately surveying his surroundings. The first thing he noticed was that the blood trail had been lifted from the carpet. He hurried to the table and there was the little half-sheet of paper, her writing faced up, not his. He held it, staring at the single word, relief flooding all his senses. He set it back down in favor of a small cardboard box that had not been there last week.

Inside he found an elaborate corkscrew which was silver with gold accent and covered in jewels. It was really an exquisite thing and Harry smiled, taking it down to the wine cellar, where he found a few new bottles, all French. They were set out in plain sight, like the corkscrew had been, and her voice echoed through his mind. *'Harry, look what I got!!'* He smiled, wondering if he'd ever see her again.

They had amassed a collection of two other corkscrews and those were kept in a drawer next to the racks. Harry added the new one and hurried back up the stairs.

He took a soda out of the fridge and stared at the mirror with it's entwined hearts as he drank it. She hadn't cleaned it and he inwardly thanked her. He needed to look at it just as he'd needed an answer to his question.

He sat down and composed a new note, one he knew she would read, but probably wouldn't answer. It didn't matter. As much as he wanted to hear from her, he would feel better knowing she understood how he felt. He kept it short, deciding she would be less likely to read a long letter.

Sara,

I know about Lucius and I don't care! I'm glad you killed him, but I worry about how it must have affected you. You don't have to go through this alone. Please come home. I miss you.

Love, Harry

He left again quickly, an idea growing in his head, something he'd been looking forward to since they'd purchased the property last August. He would not wait a week to go back, he thought as he crossed to the roof, he might return as early as tomorrow morning.

"I think you went a little farther than the shower." Dumbledore questioned as Harry fell onto the freshly made bed, "Hiding port-keys, are you?"

"We didn't intend to use them here." Harry explained, knowing port-keys were against the rules.

"They're for our house."

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"So that's where you went. Trying to torture yourself, Harry?"

"She goes there, too, sir."

"And what is that you have in your hand? Is this what has changed your mood so drastically?"

Dumbledore took it and read Harry's words silently.

Do you have regrets?

Sara's reply was on the back..

Never.

* * *

Harry hadn't been to The Phantom since Christmas and as he entered, his pockets full of Sara's money, he decided it hadn't changed a bit. Being Friday night, the place was jam packed and Harry fought his way through to the back bar. He ordered a drink and looked around, finding he actually missed the three gorillas from his first visit. The place just wasn't the same without them.

He took a seat, wondering where he should begin his search for Malfoy, scanning the crowd for a blond head, of which he found many. A very attractive girl leaned on the bar beside him and smiled flirtatiously. She had fine features, with long golden hair and blue eyes. Harry gave her a polite nod and turned away.

He stood and dropped a tip onto the bar. *To hell with Malfoy.* He thought, *There are too many memories here.*

"You aren't *leaving* are you, Potter?" Came from over his shoulder.

Harry turned to find Malfoy smirking at him, impeccably dressed, as always. "Did you have to pick

this place?" Harry asked, more upset than angry.

"Old ghosts, is it?" Malfoy tried to smile, but failed. "Come on, Potter. We'll go across the street. This is the best place to pick-up muggle girls, but I have a feeling we won't be doing much of that, am I right?"

Harry gave him a serious look of warning, then followed him out.

The Velvet Underground was darker, smaller, and more appealing to Harry. The over-crowded dance floor swarmed with energy and the music was super-charged. It was an old stone building, decorated with wrought iron and velvet, of course, not to mention black was everywhere.

"I like this place better in all honesty." Draco confessed, "But then I rarely venture out in search of *good decor*."

"Let's just get a drink."

They found a table in a dim corner, it was occupied, but Draco threw a wad of bills on the table and told them to get lost. Harry thought Malfoy was trying to get them beat up and was surprised when the group left happily, one of the guys clapping Draco on the shoulder and thanking him. Draco gave him his *'don't touch me'* glare. The girls smiled.

It was away from the floor and the music was subdued so they wouldn't have to shout. Harry took a seat while Malfoy went to the bar and got them drinks. He returned with reddish concoctions that tasted better than they looked. Harry was glad of this, for he found he was getting sick of Finnegan's Swill, not that he would ever admit it out loud.

"So Malfoy, what's this little meeting about?"

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"Nothing really."

"You said you needed to talk to me."

"No, Potter. Where'd you learn how to read? I said I *wanted* to talk to you. There's a difference."

"Do you mean you didn't want *anything at all*?"

The expression on Draco's face turned serious. "I was bored. I didn't want to see anyone else right now. Snape stayed a few days, but he thinks he's all wise and full of good advice. He doesn't understand."

Harry was sort-of touched, but bewildered. Malfoy despised him, it was a well known fact. "Why me?"

"Because, Potter. You're the only one I know who's as miserable as I am."

Harry smiled. "You know, Malfoy, I think you might be right. And after a few more of these," he held up his half-empty glass, "I may even find you tolerable."

"Hmm." Draco smiled back, "We'll see."

Harry cleared his throat, not knowing how to approach the subject except head-on. "I read the letters. And I know you kissed Sara the night of the Yule Ball."

"She was drunk, Potter. She doesn't give a shit about me."

"How I wish that were true." Harry sipped his drink, "The Elemental is drawn to dark things, and *you're* a dark thing. She adores you, and I think it sucks."

"*You're wrong*," Malfoy almost sneered, "Let's talk about something else."

"Fine. What's on *your* mind, then? You know what's on mine." Harry looked around the room, liking the darkness and the colored lights flashing. It felt good to be anonymous among people again, but he wasn't all that comfortable with Malfoy. In his opinion, Draco was acting strangely.

"I've seen Granger and the Weasel out a few times. Last time I told them to get a room. I swear, the two of them are disgusting."

Harry checked the locator just out of curiosity, and found Hermione and Ron's hands on "*snogging*".

They soon moved to "*Drinking*". "I think they're at The Phantom."

"Good thing we left. I don't know how much of *them* I could take right now."

Harry felt a spark of anger. "Did you get me down here just to insult my friends?"

Malfoy sighed. "No. But it's your turn to get drinks. I went last time."

Harry went thankfully. He didn't want Malfoy to get on his nerves. As odd as the situation was, he wanted to stay for all the same reasons. It was nice to talk to someone who knew the situation, had been deeply affected by it, but was just as bitter as he was and offered no sympathy. He paid for the drinks and left a tip, feeling he should make it a little extra, considering he was wearing a small fortune in clothes and was in the company of Mr. Mega-Millions himself.

The drinks he set down and slid one in front of Malfoy, who said nothing, just pulled out the straw, flung it on the floor, and gulped down nearly half before returning it to the table. "The day I buried my father I cursed her, Potter. I cursed the day I met her."

"She had no choice. You know that."

"She could have told Dumbledore. She could have told you, even. But what did she do? She told *me*."

The one person who could do nothing about it."

"You could have told someone just the same. She was scared, Malfoy. What's *your* excuse?"

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"Don't get angry, Potter. I need to talk about it, stupid as that sounds. You asked me what it was about Sara that appeals to Slytherins. I honestly don't know, but I believed her when she said she knew what she was doing. She has a way of lying that fooled me completely and I'm sure it's the same for Snape. She's so charming and she has this air of innocence that has a tendency to disarm, as if she cast a spell with her presence. She knew what she was doing the whole time. It was all a play to put the weight on someone else's shoulders and let them be indirectly responsible when she goes out and kills *my*

father."

"I won't let you blame her."

Draco went on as if Harry hadn't spoken. "I gave her a gift for Christmas, something you didn't know about. She left it next to my father's corpse, presumably for me to find. It's obvious what it means."

"Assume nothing, Malfoy, she's not here to defend herself and I don't know her reasons any better than you do. In fact, I came here hoping you had more to say about why Sara chose to walk out on me, but really this is just one big pity party and I won't humor you, *Draco*. I'd rather die."

"I had a visitor the other night, came into my bedroom as I slept. Do you know who it was?"

"No idea."

He lowered his voice and Harry leaned in to hear. "It was Voldemort himself."

Harry looked horrified and swallowed a lump in his throat. "So he's back, then. What did he want?"

"He wanted to know my intentions in the wake of my father's death. He asked if I would receive the Dark Mark."

"What did you say?"

"What else would I say? I told him to call at normal hours and to get the hell out of my room so I could get some sleep."

"And he didn't kill you?"

"No, but the next thing I knew I was flying through the air and was on my knees before him, that disgusting Wormtail wringing his hands by his master's side. I can honestly say I was scared half to death, but I only let him see my annoyance."

"What happened?"

"I said I had not decided, that it was too soon. He gave me two months to join him and he offered me my father's place if I brought him the Elemental."

"What?! Malfoy! *You wouldn't?!*"

"I'll *never* hand her over to him. Even if it meant my life, but I can't say what I would do if she walked into the room at this moment. Part of me wants to find her and make her pay for her betrayal. Part of me wants to forgive her. I just don't know."

"And the Mark? Will you submit to such a thing?"

"Really Potter! Of course not!"

"And you think he'll take it well?"

"Probably not."

"Dumbledore can help you. Come back with me."

"To Hogwarts? Are you mad? I finally got out of that place just two weeks ago and you think I'll go back? You must have taken a bludger to the head at some point."

"Do what you want, it's no concern of mine. Just know that he'll help you if you want to live to see eighteen."

"I already am 18! For two months now. I'm older than you. How depressing."

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"Not for long it sounds."

"We'll see."

"Malfoy? Why are you telling me this? Do you want my help or a shoulder to cry on?"

"I knew this was a stupid idea." He said and stood.

"Wait." Harry grabbed his arm. He did not give Harry the *'don't touch me'* glare. "It's your turn for drinks. Don't come back empty-handed."

Malfoy hesitated, then smiled and went to the bar.

* * *

"Where are you staying? I'll drop you off. We can't have *The Boy Who Lived* staggering down the streets of London, now can we?" Draco slid into his chauffeured limo, indicating Harry join him.

Harry got in, admiring the soft leather seats and expensive looking interior, complete with a wet bar.

"Wiltshire and Tulip. Dumbledore got me a Ministry flat for the night."

"And you're going to sleep there?"

"I had planned on it, yes."

"My father got me one of those dumpy flats once. The bed wasn't even changed from the last person, in fact there was still a head mark on the pillow. There was a fly buzzing around the place and it smelled moldy. I went to the Wescott and got a room."

Harry's face crumpled. If that's the sort of place they would offer the son of Lucius Malfoy, then what would his look like? "Maybe I'll do the same."

"I'll tell you what. I've got a house up in the hills and I've got more guest rooms than friends."

Spend the night at Malfoy's house. The offer was almost too tempting, regardless of the earlier part of their discussion, before they got really drunk and forgot they hated each other. So far they'd had a great time, once the topics turned from Sara and Voldemort to Draco giving full commentary on the couple making out in the corner. Harry hadn't laughed so hard in months and in his altered state thought hanging out at Malfoy's was a wonderful idea. "Do you have a pool?"

"Yes, but I'm not swimming with you. Besides," Draco laughed, "I think we'd sink. I do have a daiquiri machine and a really loud stereo."

"Do you have The Beatles?" Harry wondered as the car turned right and headed up an incline.

"You're so lame, Potter. Who gets cross-eyed and listens to *The Beatles*? Is that a bit of Gryffindor fun?"

"Why, what did you have in mind?"

"Marilyn Manson. There's a bunch of it in that Muggle-Music pack you gave me for Christmas."

"Really? The one you gave me is full of Gospel and this really horrible country and western."

"Oh, sorry. I thought you would like that pansy stuff. Butterflies and Sunday School and some downhome whiny crap about wholesome back-woods livin'."

"You're really a creep, Malfoy. Did you know?" Harry grinned as they passed through a black iron gate. "But I'm glad you liked mine. I thought devil music would appeal to you."

"Shove off, *Potter*. At least I put some thought behind it."

"I suppose you did."

The car came to a stop outside a grand front door of dark wood, carved in a medieval fashion and when Harry stepped out he was surprised by a small gothic mansion. It loomed above, imposing and beautiful. He was awed, but wouldn't give Malfoy the satisfaction of impressing him.

"Nice house. The rent cheap?"

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"I don't know what *the rent* is, jackass. I just picked it out."

"I wouldn't want all that money. A lot of money is nice, but just enough so that you don't lose sight of things. *You* must like it though." Harry smirked.

Draco's face turned serious and he walked through the front hall with nonchalance, his hands clasped behind his back. "I used to. Now it feels like I'm trying to compensate for something that can never be replaced." He didn't wait for Harry to answer, "Take your shoes off."

Draco led him to a room with large Turkish rugs, renaissance furnishings, and a Medieval theme. Gold suits of armor stood on each side of the mantle and in every corner of the room. There must have been a hundred candles burning, wine was already on ice next to two glasses and a chess board sat on a low table surrounded by large cushions. Malfoy went to the stereo and Harry looked around, grinning, imagining this was where Draco probably brought women. "Are you planning to seduce me, Malfoy?" Harry laughed.

"*Hardly*, *Potter*. You're not my type." Draco smiled. "This just happens to be where the stereo is. Sit down and I'll get some drinks."

"No way. I want to see you make them."

"Fine. To the kitchen then." Draco turned the music up to ear-splitting decibels and led Harry to a large room in the back corner of the house where the daiquiri machine sat alone on a counter, seemingly custom made for this appliance. There were many different mixers on a rack and Draco looked through these, pondering each before he looked over his shoulder at Harry. "Pina colada or grasshopper?" before Harry could answer, Draco made up his mind. "I don't feel like mint."

Harry closed his mouth and sat on a stool at the end of a large marble island, watching as Malfoy measured out ingredients like he'd done it a million times and dumped them into a blender while the top half of the contraption chewed up the ice. After a minute, he released the slush into the blender and turned it on. Within moments, they had their oversized drinks and set to wandering the rooms with them.

"So Malfoy, what are you planning to do about Voldemort?"

"There's nothing to be done." Draco said heavily, "So *Potter*, will you come to my funeral?"

"How can you make jokes like that? It isn't funny! Not at all!"

"No, it isn't. Unfortunately, it's realistic."

"I don't understand." Harry said, sipping his drink, "Why won't you let *Dumbledore* help you?"

"*That* old fool?"

"You don't have to like him, Draco. Stay at *Hogwarts*, I'm sure *Snape* would take you on as an apprentice. You'll be safe for awhile."

"I prefer to live dangerously."

"Yeah, or not at all." Harry shook his head in disbelief. "Do you want my help? Is that it? All you have to do is ask."

"Don't hold your breath. One *Harry Potter* rescue is my quota for life."

"Whatever, Malfoy." Harry rolled his eyes, exasperated. "Perhaps you should ask *Crabb* and *Goyle* then? If there's one thing I've learned it's that *good friends* are invaluable in such situations. If you ask me, you don't seem to have too many of those."

"I've got friends!" Draco defended.

"So where are they when the Dark Lord is at your door?"

"Standing behind him."

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"I see." Harry said and rubbed his eyes. They'd both had too much to drink and he was starting to feel the welcomed drowsiness, the festive mood slipping away. Voldemort and death threats usually had that effect on him. "I'll ask you one more time to come back with me."

"Stay here, *Potter*. No one would be the wiser. No one even knows where I live."

"You've gone mad."

"I can't go back to school and hide from him. There's no honor in it."

Unease had settled under Harry's skin, though he didn't know why and attempted to shrug off the urge to turn and run out of Draco's house. Harry cast his eyes at the floor, noticing his drink had melted and he'd barely touched it. He had surrendered completely to excess, feeling relief in the detachment that it brought, and Draco had been the perfect companion. He saw his suffering reflected in Draco, and that made returning a smile acceptable, joining in laughter became alright again. "I can't stay here, Malfoy. I have my obligations. It's *Hogwarts* or you take your chances."

Draco seemed to consider this, his hand on his chin, holding his pina colada, all but forgotten. Harry checked the locator out of habit while Malfoy paced the floor, heavily weighing his decision. Ron and Hermione were “sleeping”, Sara was still “traveling”, and he was...in “mortal peril”.

It took a moment to register and he suddenly wished he hadn't drank so much. Quick thinking was crucial and his mind was telling him to get out.

“It's getting late.” He said, casually putting his free hand in his pocket and moved very close to Malfoy, mere inches from him. His fingers flicked open the lid of the little gold box in his pocket. His voice barely a whisper, he looked Draco in the eye. “Grab my arm. *Now.*” There was an intensity in Harry's eyes that led Draco to act without question. Harry still held his drink and so did he, but his free hand wrapped around Harry's wrist. Harry touched the key.

* * *

Harry pulled his arm from Malfoy's grasp, nearly overbalancing in his haste to draw his wand. He almost spilled his drink, but managed to point in the vicinity of Draco's loathsome blond head. “*You set me up!*”

“What are you talking about, *Potter?*” Malfoy sneered, “And where the hell are we?” He looked around, forgetting there was a very angry wizard pointing a wand at his head. “Is this your house?” He turned and wandered into the dining room, sipping his melted daiquiri and taking everything in. “It's nice.” He said, as if making a final decision. “I like it. Too bad it's so small.”

Harry still stood by the front door, his wand held at arm's length, bewildered. He got the feeling Malfoy had no idea they'd been in *mortal peril*. He checked the locator again, only to find he was “home”. Draco had not been the threat and seemed honest in his perplexity.

Harry caught up to Draco, glancing once at the letter he'd left on the table, which remained unanswered and unread. Malfoy was looking at the mirror, which still held two entwined hearts, one in lipstick, the other in black marker. He had a very odd look on his face, not a pleasant one, but something like gloomy consternation. Harry stood next to him, his heart still racing from their nearencounter and sorrow now invaded him as well as he looked at the mirror.

“We weren't alone at your house.”

“Of course not. I do have servants, you know. They just stay out of sight like they're told.”

Harry showed him the locator. Draco looked at it without much interest, shrugged and sipped his drink.

“It was on “*mortal peril*” when I brought us here.”

“Potter, no one could just walk into my house. I've got a muggle alarm, all the usual wards and then some. I think you need another drink.”

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Harry ignored the sarcasm. “You said Voldemort came into your room in the night. Tell me, *how did he get in?*”

Draco's face went pale, realizing that Harry was actually quite serious. “I don't know.”

“Perhaps you should consider moving.” He hesitated, “You could always go home.”

“I can't sleep there.” He admitted, “It's creepy now. The place where my parents were murdered.”

“You're not safe where you are. We need to tell Dumbledore. He'll know what to do.”

“We're not in school anymore, Potter! When are you going to stop running to the Headmaster? We're full-fledged wizards now, we handle our own problems.”

“That sort of rationale is going to *get you killed*, Draco. Could you be any more like Sara? Insisting on handling overwhelming problems on your own, unnecessarily. You saw how wrong everything turned out in that case. Tell me, did you ever insist she go to Dumbledore about Lucius?”

“I did. So what! It's got nothing to do with what's going on now.”

“And she wouldn't listen, even though you could clearly see she was in need of help, endangering herself by being stubborn, and unwilling to see reason.”

“Yes, exactly. I wanted to shake some sense into her a few times. It was infuriating!”

“Then you know how I feel right now, Malfoy. You're arrogant, impossible, and downright irritating. If you don't listen to me you'll be sorry and by then there will be no room to reconsider.”

“*Oh shut-up*, Potter. I never should have told you.”

“How about a compromise?” Harry offered, “Come back to school for a few days. Give me some time to think about it. Talk to Snape. He escaped Voldemort, perhaps he has some sort of knowledge he could give you. You don't have to tell Dumbledore, but you should at least hear his advice. He won't help you unless you want him to.”

Draco swayed on his feet for the first time, having stringently kept a sober composure all evening and Harry wondered how he managed it. They'd had the same amount of drinks and Harry knew Malfoy was just as affected as he was, but Harry was definitely a little off-balance. Draco was thinking and wandered into the guest room, abandoning his drink and collapsing on the bed. Harry climbed onto the foot and sat down cross-legged, awaiting his response.

“Alright.” He said, “I'll stay a night or two, but it's so that I can decide what I want to do. Promise you won't go running to Dumbledore.”

“I'll do no such thing. I've seen the destruction that lies behind such promises. I'll tell him if I think you're throwing caution to the wind, but I'm not his informant, Malfoy. I'll let you try to work it out first if you insist.”

“Can I have this bed?”

“No.” Harry sighed, “We can't stay here.” He realized he was still holding the warm pina colada and

took another sip. "No one has ever slept in this house and I won't let you be the first."
Draco's head came off the pillow. "And where the hell do you think we're going? We don't even have any shoes! We left them at *my* house!"

"I have a port-key that will take us to Hogsmead. We can walk to the castle from there."

"I despise you, *Potter*. Did I ever tell you that? *It's three-thirty in the morning!!!*"

"It's not that far and it's a warm night. If we leave now we can be asleep in an hour."

"My feet will get dirty!"

"Probably."

"Perhaps in the morning I'll repay you with a broken nose. You have one coming if you recall."

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"I recall. Now get up. Let's go."

* * *

Hogsmead was nearly silent as they passed through, still carrying their pina coladas and occasionally sipping them. Draco complained about hurting his bare feet on the cobblestone lane, his socks crammed in his pockets, his eyes drunk and sleepy. Harry felt much the same and longed to touch the port-key and just go to bed, but the thought of Draco Malfoy sleeping in their house kept his feet moving.

They hardly spoke and the walk took about twenty minutes, but finally the front door was in sight.

"Come on." Harry said, pulling it open and ushering Malfoy inside, "I'm going to collapse in about five minutes."

"No kidding." Draco sighed, "I think I died about a ten minutes ago. Would you tell me if I was transparent and ethereal?"

The stairs from the great hall to the third floor were laborious and tiring, but once inside the base of the tower, Sara's rooms were just a quick broom ride away. Harry went straight to the roof, where the bed still resided, quickly charmed the dirt from his feet, and fell into it. Malfoy, to his surprise, had followed suit and collapsed onto Sara's side.

Harry yawned, snuggling into the pillow. "There *are* other beds, you know."

Malfoy yawned in return, pulling the blankets up to his chin. "This one's closest. If you touch me I'll kill you."

Harry didn't reply because he was already asleep. Draco didn't notice anyway, drifting off even as he spoke.

* * *

Sara paced the floor in her rented palazzo. Moonlight splashed the rich marble tile, the Mediterranean crashing against the breaker just below the veranda. Every once in a while a bit of salty sea water sprayed up over the rail. It dried quickly in the warm Italian moonlight.

Awakened by a vivid dream of Harry, Sara was anxious and unable to get back to sleep. It was more like a vision, and she saw him standing with Draco, a sinister shadow of advancing threat moved silently behind them, unnoticed. She'd snapped awake, terrified and unable to shake off the dread that seemed to grab her by the throat, making it hard to breathe.

The locator was on the stand by the bed. She'd gotten it quickly and was flooded with relief when it read "*home*". It was just a dream after all, but what was Harry doing at the cottage at this hour? At first she thought he was spending the night, but it would have said he was sleeping. Also, the arm kept moving back and forth between "*home*" and "*drinking*". Then again, it said he was drinking quite often lately, which depressed her immensely. Harry was not a big drinker. Even when they'd had their Friday night parties on the roof, he only ever had a few, especially after the attack on her birthday. It was her abandonment which was pushing him past his limits, and Sara for one knew how inviting the idea of drowning your sorrow could be. She'd done it when her parents died, practically every night for months, and continued to deal with her problems in the same way, all the way up to the day she had left. Since then she had vowed to drink a glass of wine with dinner at most, and to never hide from her emotions again, for Harry's sake as well as her own.

She wasn't sure what had brought her to Naples. She had thought she would go to Romania where she knew she could find help for what ailed her. The Gypsy community there harbored the secrets of the Elemental and had throughout time, so it was the only logical destination, but Sara simply wasn't ready to face the darkness in her soul. There were things she had to deal with first, like the death of her mother and father, the overwhelming force inside her that could be so hard to control, and the way she drew the interests of the Dark Lord, Voldemort.

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Evil appealed to her, not to become evil herself, but to observe it, to lose herself in people like Lucius Malfoy, who attracted her physically, mentally, and on many levels. She had to find her inner strength, and embrace it in a manner which she could maintain, *unwaveringly*, for life. Danger followed her everywhere and her often timid reaction to any sort of threat almost invited it and Sara refused to jeopardize her loved ones through weakness. They could fend for themselves, this she knew, but the part of her that kept secrets imperiled them at every turn. With this on her mind, she brought the Orb of Arassel to the table in her room and sat down in front of it.

"*Show me Harry.*"

As usual, it didn't. She saw a brief glimmer of the tower, a bed sat right in the middle, but it was fuzzy, clouded, and distant. For some reason, her talent did not extend to Harry. She felt things from him, but not like it was with other people. Images did not flash through her mind when she touched Harry. Her divining sense barely noticed him. It was more of an awareness that she had. She knew

when he needed her, when he was upset, and when he was angry. She felt a bond with Harry that defied comprehension.

Sara went back to bed, the Orb gone dark.

* * *

"What are you doing?" Harry asked, his hands clasped casually behind his back, dressed comfortably for a few hours in the library with Dumbledore.

"What does it look like?" Draco shot back, "Potter, I think it's time for a new pair of glasses." He lowered his wand and set the bed down on the roof a few feet from Sara's, the sheets neatly re-tucking themselves after traveling sideways through the doors.

Harry only gave him a blank stare, thinking Malfoy was a little presumptuous. When he'd invited him to stay at Hogwarts, he hadn't necessarily meant on the roof with him. Or even in the tower for that matter.

"I want to sleep out here. I liked it."

"I like it, too." Harry agreed, "To be in bed, but staring up at the sky and high above the world, it's nice."

"How whimsical. Do you write poetry, too?" Draco was being sarcastic, as usual.

"Yes. In fact, I just wrote a poem for you, Malfoy. It goes like this;

*You own an estate and you're pretty like a girl,
with the mind of a snake and the heart of a squirrel."*

Harry grinned his victory and went out, soon to be late for his first private lesson. They wouldn't be doing much more than talking, Harry figured, though he brought a notebook, just in case.

The Headmaster was waiting in the library when he arrived a few minutes early. He was standing between the stacks and the tables, leaning on his staff, and smiling at Harry. "I see Mr. Malfoy followed you home. A rather odd thing for him to do, but at least misery has found company."

"The *wrong* company," Harry sighed, "He's cut himself off from the other Slytherins. He said he was bored."

"And did he have any new revelations for us?"

"No, nothing. Except that he wouldn't hand Sara over to Voldemort, but if she walked into the room he's not sure whether or not he would *kill her*. That's about it."

"That's about enough as well." Dumbledore sighed. "Severus *did* say Draco was angry. I can't say as I blame him, but it's troublesome indeed. What else did he say?"

Harry hesitated, a few thoughts coming to mind. "Nothing."

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Dumbledore smiled with a hint of curiosity.

"It must have been an interesting evening. As I recall you and Draco aren't on the best of terms."

"Actually, it was fun for the most part. You'd never know it, but he can be very funny and he's different now, even more so than this past school year. I'm not sure if it's good or not, but personally I thought he was next to normal, which for someone like Malfoy, is a little weird."

"I'm sure he'll be back to his old self in no time." Dumbledore turned and indicated Harry walk with him. "Now Harry, I think it's time you learned how to apparate."

"But I thought apparating was impossible at Hogwarts?"

"It is, but there are times when it's entirely necessary, so we have a secret chamber, of course."

They approached the shelves that lined the back walls and Dumbledore drew his wand, touching it to the spine of a large black book, covered in dust. At his instruction, Harry did the same. With the password a swirl of light spiraled the length of Harry's wand and the bookcase came forward, then moved aside, revealing a set of ancient stone steps and plenty of cobwebs. Clearly, no one had been in here for quite some time. Dumbledore spoke, as if in answer. "The last time this door was opened was the day your parents died, Harry. Now it opens once again for you. Come, there's a skill to be mastered."

It was a large chamber, not huge, but about the size of the Gryffindor common room, dusty and without windows. In one corner of the room sat a wooden table with one chair, along another wall was a long stone ledge upon which one could sleep. To Harry's dismay, a skeleton lay crumbling on one end of it. There were two covered urns on the table and Harry moved to inspect them. One read

"Nutrium Potion", the other *"Poison"*.

Dumbledore was looking over the remains when Harry turned to him. "Wizards get stuck in here?"

"Yes. Wizards like this rather unfortunate fellow. One turns up every once in a while and eventually chooses the poison. I used to come down occasionally, but it's slipped my mind these past few years. I wonder how long our friend here lasted?"

"*Sir!*" Harry said, shocked.

"Don't worry, Harry. Any wizard who tries to get into Hogwarts through this chamber is not on our side. There are very few who know about it. Minerva, Hagrid, and myself."

"Just the *three* of you?"

"Voldemort knows as well." He sighed, "He was always in the library. In fact before Miss Granger, Tom Riddle was the last student given a key to the Restricted Section. He overheard a conversation between the Headmaster and myself, for I was still teaching at that time, and learned of the apparition chamber's existence. He could never get in, of course, he needed one of us to unblock his wand, like I just did for you, but he does send one of his followers every so often. Unfortunately, he never sees them again."

"Then how do we get out?" Harry wondered.

"The same spell that opened the door will allow also lower the spell that holds the room for the one with the correct wand. However, we won't be going anywhere today, I think. We'll stay inside these walls for now."

"What if I end up in China?"

"Then I suggest you come back."

"You know, we learned how to apparate last term, but I wasn't able to do it. I tried every time we went to Hogsmead. None of us managed it, but others did."

"So you don't think you have the capability?"

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"I do, I mean I have before. Once, when I was running away from my cousin and his friends, I suddenly found myself sitting on a chimney. Now, when I try to do it, I don't move an inch. I'm doing something wrong."

Dumbledore moved to stand behind him and gave his instructions over Harry's shoulder. "Focus on the chair across the room and decide you want to stand beside it. Put all your emotion behind that one thought."

Harry did as he was told, his brow creased with effort and concentration. "It's not working."

"Try harder."

* * *

Around three o'clock Dumbledore decided to call it a day. Harry had managed to get to the chair about two out of every ten tries, which was thrilling to him, but would obviously take some work. They agreed to meet the next morning and Harry was off to the cottage, a book called *"Carving with Magic"* under his arm.

Malfoy was in his boxers and shirtless when Harry returned, sunning himself on a chaise longue and reading the Quidditch Cup article in *Witch Weekly*. It stung him to see one of Sara's charms around Draco's neck, one that almost matched his own, but Harry was more upset by his state of undress.

"Well, there goes my appetite." Harry grimaced, "Put some clothes on, this isn't the locker room."

"Jealous?"

"Hardly. Smug bastard. I'll be back later. I have some work to do at the house." Harry informed him.

"Why don't you just go ahead and make yourself at home."

"Of course I will." Draco grinned, "Oh and Potter? I used your toothbrush."

Harry appeared horrified. "Yuck! You've got a lot of nerve!"

"Just kidding. I went to Hogsmead and bought one."

"You're lucky. I was almost forced to re-break your nose." Harry grinned, "If you want we can chase the snitch around later. It's something to do that's outside."

"Sure. And after that, we'll go to Hogsmead."

"Alright. I need a few things anyway."

"What's that? *Carving with Magic*? You really are a pansy, aren't you? Will you make me a little ducky?"

"Sure, to go with all the other *little* things in your bathtub."

With that, Harry touched the key and disappeared, not wanting to have the conversation he'd just opened up.

The note was still on the kitchen table where he'd left it and although he was disappointed, it had only been 2 days. Obviously, she wouldn't go there as often as he would. As anxious as he was to get started, Harry decided to prepare for Sara's next visit.

He opened the house to a beautiful day and a warm ocean breeze. Charming the drifting debris from the patio, he snipped a big bouquet of white and lavender roses, fresh baby's breath, and some weird but pretty purple things and carried them back into the kitchen. There were vases of many shapes and sizes in the pantry and Harry picked what he judged to be the prettiest one, then sat at the table arranging the flowers until they were perfect. Only then did he open the book.

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He'd read most of what he needed to know during the long lunch he and Dumbledore had taken, but needed to refresh his memory on a few things, jotting down notes and the spells he'd be using. He'd learned how to blast away rock, create a magical entrance, and use his wand to find caverns and even veins of ore. He was surprised at how basic it was, how simple.

After changing into his swimming trunks, Harry navigated the narrow ledge that led down the face of the cliff until his feet found the frigid English Channel and he shivered all over. The water was only up to his waist, but he couldn't bear the thought of submerging himself in it, regardless of the warm sunny day.

Aiming his wand at the area where he thought the cave was, he created an arc-shaped dam and was amazed when it worked yet again. It was something he'd made up on the spot when he'd first come down and really hadn't thought it would amount to much.

The gritty sand was still wet and cold under his feet, but it was better than nothing and Harry made a mental note to bring a pair of sandals on his next visit.

Laying his wand on the palm of his hand, a quick spell revealed he had been right about there being a cave behind his chalk outline and his excitement grew considerably. A cave would mean less rock removal, no matter what it's size. It could only be good, unless, of course, something lurked inside it. A piece of chalk worked its magic at his command, drawing perfect lines, precise spacing, and artful lettering over the older, faded drawing he'd done at Christmas. Stepping all the way back to the edge of the dam, Harry recited the words from the scrap of paper he'd brought and looked on with wide

eyes as the chalk began to glow and seemed to sink into the stone and he gave the password. *Diamond Tiara*. Harry smiled in spite of himself. He'd had to pick something that wouldn't be said in conversation, and this was one thing he couldn't imagine coming from a boatful of Death Eaters. And it was a little joke on Sara, the storybook princess, who would one day live in a little castle high above this very spot.

He could see the frame for the arch had been etched deep into the rock and read the legend, smiling at his accomplishment. *Friends may pass, but foe beware, lightning strikes all those who dare*. Not very clever, but it did get the point across.

Now came the moment he'd been waiting for and bracing himself for a massive detonation, he shielded his face and sent a blast at the arch. The rock crumbled, but didn't explode, an enormous cloud of tiny pieces sweeping like dust out to sea. Harry had planned to break up the large chunks he'd expected and levitate them further into the water, but as it turned out, the spell carried out his bidding without any extra effort from him. All that was left behind was a gaping hole full of darkness and shadow in the perfectly rounded shape of the archway.

Without further ado, Harry stepped into the tunnel, holding his wand like a candle. "*Lumos*." He said, his voice echoing through the considerable dark. He waded through thirty meters of chest high water before he found his cave.

Astonishment came with the light and Harry stood rooted to the spot. *Wow* he thought, thinking this was more than just a cave and as he waded inside he realized this was a wide cavern, dotted with aged stalactites and stalagmites, fused into solid columns of sediment. The roof was at least 15 feet high and he couldn't see any back wall, it just seemed to keep going.

The water was over his head in the cave, which he was glad of because he wouldn't have to deepen it for the boats, but now that he was soaking wet and freezing, exploring the cave seemed like a good plan for tomorrow. Besides, the sun was getting ready to set and Malfoy was expecting him, not that Harry cared if Draco had to wait, but a warm shower and some dry clothes sounded simply wonderful. He made his way out until he stood in the almost-dry work area. "*Nox*" he said, extinguishing his wand.

Once he was back on the ledge, he released the dam and saw that the huge arch had filled itself in and looked just like a faint carving in the rock, barely noticeable unless you knew it was there. A smile of promise touched Harry's lips as he climbed and already he couldn't wait to return.

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20. Melancholy Nights

Harry pounded on the door a second time before noticing a little yellow note stuck to the inside of the window. It said in sloppy print "Use side". He found the side door, black electrical tape covered the button for the bell, so he hammered on the door and waited, hearing no movement inside. "Sanders!" He yelled, "It's Harry, I need to talk to you!"

He waited again for a response, then moved to a nearby window. Cupping his hands around his eyes, Harry peered in. He saw a tiny living room containing a couch, a recliner, a TV stand, and a coffee table. His breath caught in his throat as he looked at this last item, on top of which was a half-empty bottle of Finnegan's Swill and a teacup.

He glanced around at the neighboring houses, wondering if the rowboat he had tied to the roof of the SUV would be safe if he went inside. Sara either was here or had been in the past, so his mind was easily made up.

Harry had found a holster for his wand in Hogsmead, since the only inconspicuous place to hide it was under his shirt in summer. The holster clipped onto his shorts and he carefully drew the wand and did a quick *Alohamora*, letting himself into Mr. Sander's flat.

It took only a moment for him to check the three tiny rooms. Sara was not here and, judging from the spot of mold on the little pool of dried tea at the bottom of the cup and the layer of dust that covered an otherwise immaculate space, no one had been here in weeks. He had not heard from Sanders lately and had seen no sign of him having been at the cottage. It became evident that Sara had taken him with her. Harry found he was glad of this. Sara was not alone and even though Sanders was a muggle photographer turned care-taker, Harry trusted him as Sara did and knew the man's heart was always in the right place. If there was trouble, he could never protect Sara, but Sanders would try, of this Harry was sure and it helped ease his worries.

Something Sara had told him came into his memory, a vision she had shared many months ago. Sara had said that when she shook Sanders' hand on the front walk of the Criterion that she'd seen herself in the future, shaking his hand again and thanking him. This made Harry smile, thinking it meant that Greg wouldn't be getting himself killed while he was with Sara, and that he would be good to her. Harry sighed and climbed back behind the wheel. If he was to intercept the new housekeeper, Elizabeth, he would need to get on his way. The letter from Sara's lawyer, Brad Silverman, had said she'd be arriving at 6pm and London was a long way from the cottage.

Harry had written to Brad, asking him to rent an SUV, but Brad had simply told him to look in the garage. Harry couldn't believe he had never thought to do this before. Of course Sara would have thought of muggle transportation ahead of time and he'd found a big silver Lexus SUV and a gorgeous black Jaguar convertible. He'd wanted to drive the car, of course, but needed a truck for the boat, to his dismay, and decided to take the Jaguar for a little spin later that night. Perhaps he'd even take Malfoy, who was acting more and more unlike himself and grew more depressed every day. His presence in Sara's tower was getting on Harry's nerves, watching him touch her things, turning photos face-down, his expression dark and troubled as he did so.

Draco rarely left the tower, unless it was in Harry's company. Snape had been planning to leave the day before and postponed when Malfoy showed up at the castle, but Draco barely spoke to him. Snape had come during the day while Harry was training with Dumbledore, and Harry had overheard him telling the Headmaster that Malfoy had grown distant.

There was a very good restaurant about ten minutes from the cottage, at least he'd *heard* it was good while in the little sea-side village earlier, so he stopped and got some fish and chips to-go. He had no plans of going back to Hogwarts for dinner.

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Elizabeth was getting out of her car when he pulled up, right on time. He pulled around and parked in front of the garage, leaving the boat for later.

Elizabeth was a stout, quiet woman in her forties or fifties and Harry liked the sight of her. She had her grayish hair in a tidy bun on the back of her head, she was short, and had an agreeable air about her. Her head had a proud lilt and she wore a clean, pressed gray uniform with what appeared to be nurse's shoes. He showed her inside and offered her a Coke, which she declined, and he set the bag of take-out on the dining room table.

"There are only a few things I need to ask of you," Harry explained, "*Never* clean that mirror." He indicated the entwined hearts and she nodded her understanding. "Also, this might seem strange to you, but don't move anything, no matter how out of place it may seem. Especially on the kitchen table. Never touch *anything* on the kitchen table." Again she nodded. "I guess all you'll need to do around here is basic dusting, vacuuming, stuff like that. There shouldn't be many dishes to wash and there's a dishwasher anyway. Clean the bathroom and the kitchen. Sweep and mop. The usual. No one lives here, but I pop in now and again. My, uh, my fiance stops by on occasion, too." It felt strange to be calling Sara his fiance. They were hardly "together" at the moment and it seemed like a lie to say it out loud. "I don't really know where anything is, you'll have to find what you need. Sorry." He said, his voice hushed with the painful thought of Sara, "I'll be taking my new boat, so if you finish up before I get back I guess I'll see you next week."

Elizabeth was already going about her work as he emerged from the bathroom in his swimming trunks. He gathered the things he had gotten from Hogsmead during his trip with Malfoy in a large box, threw in an old shirt in case he got cold, as well as his dinner, and carried it all out to the driveway. Standing on the other side of the Lexus, Harry used his wand to remove the cords and levitated it off the roof, pretending he was lifting it with his hands and pretended to carry it over his head to the cliff where he was hidden from view. If he had to lie, he would say he'd lowered it down with a rope, which he could conjure if needs be, but all he really did was levitate it down to the water. Using the skills he'd learned this morning, he apparated into the boat, the box in his arms, bags of hardware from London thrown on top. He used magic to direct the boat through the arch, wand alight, but decided to row his way through the vast cavern at the end of the tunnel. Veering to the left, he got out his piece of chalk and directed it to draw a large square, broken by the outline of pillars. He pointed his glowing wand at this and recited the carving spell, adding the depth it should be at the end. Once again a great cloud of rock particles zipped through the cave and left behind a landing, fifteen feet deep, ten feet high, and supported by 4 rough, square columns of solid stone along the front. For these, he scanned the sheet of paper, coming across what he wanted near the bottom. Soon, they became intricate Roman pillars, entwined with rose vines and scrolled at the top and bottom. Carrying sconces he'd found in Hogsmead, Harry stepped onto his landing and attached them to the wall, then dropped a few Never Ending Fire pellets in each before returning to the boat in the warm glow they produced. Now that the landing existed, he would touch it up later. For now, he ate his fish and chips as he squared the walls of the cavern and added a sconce every few feet. Eventually, he no longer needed his wand for light and pulled it from the hole he'd created to hold it.

"Nox."

The cave was suddenly alive with firelight and Harry loved the effect, though it was rather dark in the middle and the water was jet black. He found he loathed not being able to see what was swimming around beneath him and Harry got a brilliant idea. Setting the fish aside and standing up in the boat, he aimed his wand and charmed the sand at the bottom to sparkle and glow like blue diamonds. Brilliant it was, as the whole pool lit up like it was made of pure light, but it was also quite blinding and Harry threw an arm over his eyes and toned it down until it was just a faint glow that didn't overpower the warmth of the sconces. A hint of moonlight, caught in a drop of rain.

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Rowing over to the center of the cave, Harry surveyed the area, decided what he would need, then set to carving the stalagmites, all of which had fused with it's partner underneath many, many years before. The first time he's seen them, they had reminded him of tree trunks, so that's exactly what he transformed them into, their branches covered in intricate leaves, spreading across the ceiling. As he finished every other one, Harry used his wand to attach a bracket on two sides and placed in them Never Ending Torches, high above his head.

Checking his watch, he found he had been eating this same piece of fish for 2 hours. There wasn't much left of it, as he had lifted it in between projects, dipping it in sauce, then taking a bite or two. The cave looked like a different place, part room, part castle, part forest, all of it petrified. Finishing the fish, he rowed back over to the landing and cut three sets of steps between the four pillars. The lowest step was perfectly even with the edge of the boat, and Harry stepped out once again.

Over the next two hours, he focused totally on creating large and small recesses where they would

display certain things, maritime figures, and their crest in the big center one on the back wall. It was work that took heavy concentration, with all the detail he included to frame these spaces quite spectacularly, and found he was tired at the end of it.

Harry smiled around at his achievements before rowing back to the tunnel and securing the boat near the ledge, which he climbed unnecessarily.

Elizabeth was gone and the house smelled of lemon and pine. The bathroom shone and he found his clothes folded and set aside when he went in. Checking his watch again as he dressed, Harry decided Malfoy would be alone in the tower, expecting him to return soon. He would take Malfoy in the car, but how to do it without showing him where the house was?

That, he would figure out eventually.

* * *

Sara wandered a small Roman shop that held the most exquisite things, and her hand happened upon a shiny brass replica of a lighthouse and she lifted it for closer inspection. It was more than she would expect to pay, but liked it so much she thought she might buy it anyway. Her eye had wandered to other such nautical items throughout the evening, though she didn't know why. That type of decor had never appealed to her, but perhaps it had something to do with her palazzo in Naples being so close to the sea.

Out the window Sara caught a glimpse of a man she had seen at dusk in another section of Rome, and later browsing in an open market. There he was again, watching her through the window from the other side of the crowded street. He was tall with shoulder-length brown hair and he wore dark glasses to hide his eyes, but she could feel them on her all the same. His clothing seemed an afterthought, mismatched, and out of place. With her new determination, she set down the lighthouse and left the store, searching the opposite walk, but the stranger was gone. He had vanished in a moment's time. She felt on guard. There was a sense of danger on the air, not necessarily intended for her, but certainly formidable and the hairs stood on the back of her neck. Something felt out of context and Sara gave up her search of the crowded street. Mr. Sanders came through the door behind her, laden with bags containing a few gypsy-ish outfits, mostly black, and some handmade scarves she'd found a few stores back. The rest of it was mostly little maritime trinkets she'd found and felt the oddest inclination to buy.

She pondered this as Greg led her down the street, not speaking much as he had, thankfully, learned to do. In fact, Sara realized she had never even *liked* the seaside motif and still couldn't imagine putting these things in the cottage or in the house they might someday build.

These were not things she herself wanted, she was sure of it. She was reading someone else and it was Harry she thought of, as she had at every purchase and she smiled despite the sorrow it brought her to think of him. Lifting the locator from its long chain around her neck, she saw he was "*Home*". Yes, she thought, *our little home by the sea*.

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She let herself into the big black Ford as Mr. Sanders loaded the bags in the back, then joined her for the long journey back to Naples, sliding silently behind the wheel. Sara's mind turned back to the stranger who was surely following her and wondered about the strange vibe she'd felt outside the shop. *Danger!* it told her, but she hadn't felt threatened. He was no muggle, of that she was certain, but what strange wizard would merely shadow her and keep his distance? She got the idea the man might be frightened of her, or hesitant to approach while she was accompanied. Whomever he was, he would have a hard time finding her again, she thought, as the Ford sped farther and farther away from Rome.

Sara looked out at the dark Italian countryside, her head resting against the window, remembering the night she'd fled England, her eyes somber, her thoughts on Harry.

* * *

Draco was laying on his bed, next to Harry's on the roof, fully dressed and awake. He was staring up at the moon, the Muggle Music Player on the bed beside him, blasting chaotic, angry music. An image of the album cover floated and slowly twirled above it and Harry saw it was *Marilyn Manson*. He thought it was horrible and flipped the lid closed, cutting off the sound and nearly frightening Draco half to death.

"What do you think you're doing?" He bellowed, annoyed and embarrassed at having been caught off guard. "I was *listening* to that if you didn't notice."

"I never said you could borrow it. I swear Malfoy, is nothing sacred to you?"

"Stop whining, Potter. I know she gave it to you for Christmas. I was there, remember?"

"How could I forget?"

"Who cares. It's not a *personal* item or anything. You act like I'm standing here reading your love letters."

"I'm sure that's somewhere near the top of your list."

"Did you disturb me for a reason? Or are we late for insult hour?"

"Just *get up!* And comb your hair. You're really starting to look like a hippie, you know."

"You should talk! I don't think you've had a haircut in months, Potter. Looking a little sloppy if you ask me. Why am I getting up, anyway? It's late."

"It's only ten!"

"We're going out?"

"Yes, but not drinking. There was a car in our garage. Thought you might want to ride along while I tested it out."

"I *have* ridden in a car, you know. My father keeps one."

"Does he have a convertible Jag, jet black, with chrome wheels and a killer sound system?"

"I'll just be a minute." Draco said and hurried off to the dressing room.

Harry started flipping through cds, looking for a few they both might like. He choose *Oasis*, The Beatles meets Modern Rock. There was no better compromise.

Harry collected his Lightning Mach 2 from the hall and yelled "I'll be right back!" before lifting off from Sara's bedroom and flying through the doors, leaving the roof behind.

He returned only minutes later and Draco was waiting, holding the Oasis CDs Harry had left on the table. "Can we bring these?" He asked.

Harry smiled and nodded. "Well go on, grab my arm."

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Draco did and Harry flipped open the little gold box.

"Hmm. It *smells* better." Draco announced as he crossed the living room, looking around in the moonlight. "Less dusty. I abhor dust."

"Dust abhors you, too, I'm sure." Harry switched on the light and walked to the kitchen, leaving Malfoy to whatever it was he was doing. He saddened when he saw his note still where he'd left it on the table, untouched, unread, unanswered. He dragged his eyes from it and found what he was looking for, the keys to the Jaguar, which he'd hidden earlier in a drawer. Draco brushed past him, threw open the doors to the patio and started the fires with a wave of his wand. He fell into a chaise lounge and loudly wished they had some steaks for the grill. The smile fell off his face when Harry appeared over him, his expression furious, his voice low and controlled.

"You certainly have your nerve! How *dare you* make yourself comfortable here after the things you told me? *Get up.*" Harry grabbed Malfoy's arm and jerked him out of his seat.

"What the hell did *I* do? You can't just go around ripping people's arms out, *Potter!*"

"*Get off Sara's patio!*"

"You brought me here." Draco scowled and stormed back into the house. Harry walked casually back inside, extinguishing the flames and closing the doors. Draco waited in the kitchen, watching as Harry secured the doors too slowly, his eyes downcast and painfully sentimental.

Draco's voice was calm and had lost it's edge when he addressed Harry again. "I don't know what you want me to do. It's ok for me to stay in her tower at Hogwarts and I can touch her things." He indicated the cds, "I can come to your house, but then I walk out on the patio and you lose it."

"I'm sorry." Harry said, his eyes still on the brass handle, though he was finished with the locks,

"Things are different here."

"Do you want to go back?"

"No." He looked up and stepped away from the doors, "I want to go get the car and see what it can do." He gave Malfoy a little half-smile and led the way to the front door, turning off the lights and digging the muggle key out of his pocket. To his surprise, Draco's hand fell on his shoulder when he stopped to turn on the alarm.

"Let go of her, Harry. Sara moved on. It's time you did, too."

The hand slipped away and Harry heard Draco walk out onto the landing. He stood for a moment, looking at the palm of his hand, then closed his fingers around the lines there and went out.

Malfoy's eyes lit up when Harry pulled the car out of the garage. He climbed casually into the passenger seat, trying to hide a delighted smile and not look impressed.

"So, Potter. Where are we headed?" He asked as he shuffled through the three cds, deciding on one and handing it to Harry, realizing he had no clear idea of how to operate the complicated player in the dash.

Harry smirked at Draco's ignorance and got the music working effortlessly. "London."

"But we're on the *coast!* Wherever we are, it will take *hours* to get there!"

"That's why I went to Hogsmead before we left and got *this.*" He pulled a little wooden box from his pocket and held it up. "It's a port-key. It will take us to some town a half-hour from the city."

"I was just going to suggest that."

"Gee Malfoy, I don't know what I'd do without you. I'd be *lost.*"

"Shove off, Potter. Where the hell are we anyway?" He looked distastefully around at the new, boring surrounds, which included a pasture containing several cows and an old work horse that looked ready for the slaughter house, even in the dark. The dumpy little town was visible just up the road. Except for an occasional moo, it was dead quiet and a bit unnerving.

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"I have no idea."

"Well let's get out of here. I hate cows."

"Yeah, cows are pretty gross." Harry laughed and started the engine. Taking out his wand and laying it on his open palm, he said "*Point me. London.*"

Maneuvering off the shoulder, he headed down the road and Draco figured out the volume. As soon as they passed through town and were headed through the cow-dotted countryside, Harry pressed his foot on the gas pedal and exploded along the pavement grinning, his hair flying in the wind. Turning *Oasis* up to a deafening pitch, he pushed the Jaguar the way he pushed his Mach 2 and sang along to *Live Forever*, doing his best Liam Gallagher and soon forgetting Malfoy was in the seat beside him, singing, unnoticed.

* * *

Sara stared into the box, not understanding what she was seeing and frightened by what it might mean.

She passed her hand over the brass lighthouse, reciting a word in the old language that Mr. Sanders could not comprehend, and was relieved to find there were no spells cast, no charms or curses. He wondered at her as she pulled it out of the box and sat down at the table with it. The box had been left at the main entrance to the palazzo and Sara was sure it was the very same brass lighthouse she had looked over in Rome just a few hours before. It was what she'd been doing when she'd spotted the stranger, watching her through the window. In fact, she'd been about to buy it. Earlier, during the ride home, the locator said that Harry went from "School" to "Home". He'd spent most of the day at the cottage and she could only wonder what he'd been doing there. Or why he'd gone back to Hogwarts for what appeared to be only a few minutes and had returned at such a late hour on a Sunday night. She knew he would never sleep there. Perhaps he'd forgotten something, she thought.

Mr. Sanders had taken her purchases from their bags and set them out on the table as she ran a finger over the smooth metal of the lighthouse, considering it, wondering why she had wanted it so much. The notion that her proximity to water was a valid explanation was ludicrous. It had to be Harry somehow. She would give it to him, then. All of these things. She would take them to the cottage and leave them on the table. It was all she could think of to do, she just hoped he didn't put them in the living room.

"Greg, help me put these back in the bags." She asked and stood, "I think I bought them for someone else."

Mr. Sanders asked no questions, just set to the task.

Another check of the locator said that Harry was still "Traveling", which meant he was either on his broom or he'd taken the car. Either way, he was not currently at the cottage and Sara made a quick decision to go now. She gathered up the bags and the lighthouse, back in its box and locked herself in her bedroom, just one door down from Greg's.

It was risky, going to the cottage while Harry was around somewhere, probably close by, but she reasoned she could be gone just as quick as she'd come and would keep the port-key in her hand while she was there.

Pulling a black robe on over her clothes, she raised the hood, gathered the packages, and flipped open the key.

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The lights were still on in the kitchen so she went there very cautiously, even though the locator still said Harry was elsewhere. When she found herself alone, Sara dropped the bags and the lighthouse on the table and sat down heavily in front of the note. Tears fell from her eyes as she read his words, dotting the paper and making the ink run in places. The rain came down outside, splattering the windows and tapping rhythmically on the roof. He knew about Lucius. She didn't know how, unless Malfoy had spilled the whole story when he'd found his father murdered. Her brief encounter with Draco's psyche left her convinced that he knew it was her, so it stood to reason he'd tell someone and as much as she wanted to be angry, she found she didn't blame him.

Sara opened the little bottle of ink and picked up the quill, dipping it and brining the tip to the page. *I'm glad you don't hate me, Harry. Someday I'll explain everything, but right now I can't come home.*

I miss you, too. You have no idea.

Mr. Sanders is---

An engine roared passed and headlights bounced in through the windows, throwing streaky squares of light on the walls and Sara leapt to her feet. She grabbed the port-key and ran to the window. Two figures in the rain sprinted toward the house, one reflecting the moonlight in his glasses, the other gossamer blond. Panic seized her, she fumbled and dropped the key.

* * *

"Sara!" Harry called as he burst through the door with Malfoy right on his heels.

"Where is she?" He yelled, drawing his wand, his face twisted in anger.

Harry ripped the wand from Draco's hand, grabbed him by the throat and slammed him hard into the wall. One look at Harry's eyes was enough to scare Draco half to death and he was relieved when Harry swung the door open and shoved him outside. The locks slid home and Draco stood helpless on the step, listening to Harry call to her, his voice desperate and near hysterical. He lowered his head. For what was probably the first time in his life, he felt real compassion. It twisted something in his stomach and amplified his hatred of Sara. The bringer of misery, ruining lives in her wake. The small part of him that still loved her wanted to break down the door and do exactly what Harry was doing, but he couldn't. He refused.

Harry tore through the house, but felt himself pulled to the living room again and again. He begged her to come out, to see him just for a moment. He pleaded with her not to leave him like this, when they were so close. He said he would go insane if she left as he bellowed through room after room. Finally, his heart thundering in his chest, his breath coming fast and deep, he collapsed to his knees in the middle of the living room.

Sara held a black lace scarf over her mouth to muffle her sobs as the other hand snaked around under the couch she hid behind, searching for the port-key. She felt it, but in her haste, sent the little gold box skidding down by her feet, out of reach.

Harry could feel her near him, he knew she was there without the locator. That she wouldn't come to him frustrated him to madness and his face fell into his hands, his glasses falling to the floor and he was sobbing helplessly. "Sara please!" He begged her, "How can you do this to me? Don't you love me at all? I'm going crazy, I *have* to see you! I don't understand! How can you be this close and still

turn your back on me? What did I do to deserve this? I love you, Sara. I need to see you. Please come out, you can leave again if you want but do this before you go. *Please*, I'm begging you." Thunder shook the house as rain like he had never seen flooded the ground outside the window. Hurricane winds rattled the glass and Harry heard trees being ripped from the ground under the force of it. Malfoy was hammering on the door and screaming to be let in as a blinding flash of lightning tore the old oak in half, igniting it as it crashed. Harry turned back to the couch, to which he was unconsciously focusing his attention, his words choked with emotion.

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"Sara, *do you still love me?* Say yes and I'll wait forever."

Sara dropped the scarf and choked back tears, the port-key open in her hand, fighting the need to run to him, end his suffering and her own. To let the sheer agony of this moment become one of the happiest of her life just by putting her arms around him, feeling the warmth of his skin, his breath on her neck as he rested his head against hers. Her fingers hovered above the port-key, and her sobs finally broke her silence. "*I love you more than anything.*" She cried as he lunged forward, hitting his head on the wall trying to find the source of her voice, but he found only a black scarf, wet with tears. The storm tapered off quickly and Draco hammered on the door again, demanding Harry let him in. He was very wet, cold, and frightened by the intensity of the event. He'd had to hold tight to a wooden post to keep from being blown away and was anxious to get back inside. Relief came when the locks were slid back and the door opened a crack, Harry having already walked away. Draco let himself in and retrieved his wand from the floor where it had been dropped.

He found Harry in the kitchen, his head low, sniffing, and working intently at an ink spill next to the table. Evidently, Sara had been writing a note and their arrival had caught her off guard. The chair was overturned and he could see a black streak across the paper where the quill had been whisked away mid-word. Draco sighed as Harry wiped at his eyes every few seconds and sniffled continuously. Respectfully, he turned his back and stared out the window at the dark. "I wouldn't have done it, Potter."

"Leave me alone" Harry whispered.

Draco hung his head for a moment, then grabbed a towel and knelt by Harry's side. Silently, he helped clean the spill.

* * *

Snape was at his desk in his private chamber when he heard a pop from behind, coming from the fire place, then a sobbing girl called to him.

"Severus!" She cried, "Severus please be there!"

"Sara!" He said and hurried to the fire, only to be shocked by her hooded appearance, not to mention the extreme emotional state she was in. "Sara, are you in danger?"

"No." She said, bringing a tissue to wipe her eyes, her head and shoulders greenish in the flames. "I need to see you, Severus. I made a serious misjudgment tonight and I fight every second not to go home. Just say you'll come."

"Where are you? *Of course* I'll come."

"Thank you." She whispered and visibly relaxed, "Naples, Italy. A palazzo on the sea. Think of me and you should find the right one."

"Don't do anything until I get there."

"Tell no one."

"I wouldn't."

In the blink of an eye, Sara was gone and Snape was gathering a few things for the trip, then hurrying out the door with his broom. He flew to Hogsmead, then set to concentrating on Sara, in her palazzo by the sea. Apparating had never been one of his strong suits and he'd never gone so far at once, but he suddenly found himself standing amidst a furious storm, waves crashing on some nearby beach. He spotted the lights of a single level house, sprawling and open. He hurried toward it at once.

A muggle led him in and took him to the door of Sara's room. They could hear her crying inside, a horrible and wretched sound and Greg lowered his eyes. "It was all of a sudden. She's been like this for nearly an hour now. She won't tell me what happened."

"Well," Snape muttered, "it could only have something to do with Potter."

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"I'm not supposed to speak of him, sir."

"If you care to help her mister..."

"Sanders. Greg Sanders."

"Mr. Sanders, you will discourage her from anything that might possibly summon any sort of *remembrances* of Harry Potter. Do you understand?"

"Yes, but what happened with them? They seemed, well, very much in love. It doesn't add up. I thought there was something wrong with her the last few times..."

"If Sara wanted you to know I'm sure she would fill you in. Now if you don't mind, there is a young girl in distress on the other side of this door, in case you hadn't noticed."

"I'm sorry, sir." Greg mumbled, his eyes on the floor. Silently, he walked away.

Snape rapped lightly on the door. "I'm here, Sara." He called in to her.

"*Alohamora*." Came her unsteady reply. "Come in Severus." Her voice was hoarse and full of tears. She stood with her back to him, staring out a long bank of tall windows at the Mediterranean, thrashing against the coast in the storm. The rain painted her with streaks of gray. She wore an old gypsy style dress, a strip of black around her throat. She wore a black satin cloak, the hood pulled

down to shadow her face. There was no light in the room, but the moon cast a silvery glow and he saw her reflection in the window with every flash of lightning.

His voice was hushed in the dark, but conveyed his unease. "Sara. What's happened to you?" She turned to face him, her eyes hidden in shadow. She untied the cloak in one liquid movement, and pushed back the hood, where it fell softly to the floor. Fresh tears coursed down her cheeks as she trembled in the moonlight.

Snape froze at the sight of her. "*My god.*" He whispered, his fingers touching his chin, alarmed and frightened for her. Suddenly, she was traveling across the floor and threw her arms around him and he held her as she cried on his shoulder. He couldn't really understand her words, but a name came up over and over again as she spoke.

Harry.

* * *

Harry climbed into bed and turned his back on Malfoy's side of the roof, the covers pulled over his head. There was a letter from Ron on the pillow, but he had tossed it away, overcome with misery. To be so close, to hear her voice, telling him she loved him more than anything, it was pure agony. He thought nothing could be so horrible or hurt so much as when she'd left him the first time, but this cut deeper than anything he'd ever felt. He clung to the scarf she'd left behind, breathing her perfume and remembering the sound of her voice, choked with tears from behind the sofa, only a few feet from where he'd been.

He heard Malfoy climb into bed, no sarcastic remarks tonight. He actually thought Malfoy might feel sorry for him and that was the most depressing of things. He felt pathetic and held the lace scarf tighter.

He laid there a good half hour, listening to the wind in the trees, to the far away splashes of the lake. Once in a while he heard the low voice of Fang, barking at something moving about the Forbidden Forest. Then he heard Malfoy, standing beside him.

"I know you're awake." He said, "Care to drown your sorrow, Potter?" Malfoy left a glass on Harry's stand, walked around the bed to what was once Sara's side and climbed onto the blankets, tossing the pillow against the headboard. He settled back with a glass and a bottle of Finnegan's Swill from a case that had arrived while they were gone.

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Harry pulled the blankets off his face and turned onto his back, his eyes wet and red-rimmed, his face pale in the moonlight. Reluctantly, he reached for his glasses and put them on, his hair standing up in confusion. He pulled himself up as Malfoy poured straight alcohol over ice and reaching thankfully for his glass, he held it out.

"Your hair is frightening, Potter, or are you going for that wild-man look?" Draco asked as he poured. "Oh shut-up." Harry sighed.

Draco took a deep breath. "Did you see her, Harry?"

"No." Harry lowered his eyes, staring into his glass. "But I heard her voice. She spoke to me."

"What did she say?"

"None of your business."

"Do you want to talk?" Draco felt stupid, even as the words left his mouth.

"No."

"Then shut-up about it." Draco took a sip, "Besides, I'm sick of hearing about her. I hope I never see her again. Well, sort of."

"Malfoy?" Harry looked up at the stars, "I really hate you, you know."

"Sure you do."

Harry ignored him, glad of his company, but he didn't want to talk and didn't have the energy to match Draco's insults. "*Accio Muggle Music Player.*" He said and opened it when it came. He picked the most depressing thing he could find and set it to a moderate volume, then lowered it to the floor. He sipped his drink as they watched the sky, Malfoy having fallen silent beside him.

* * *

Around three Malfoy had crept back to his own bed, but Harry was restless and drunk, finally crying himself to sleep just as the sun was coming up. He awoke now to find Dumbledore in a chair by the bed, watching Harry as he came out from under the covers, his eyes red and sore, his body aching and hung-over. Immediately he checked the locator, still on his wrist, and saw that Sara was "*Sleeping*".

"What time is it?" Harry asked while trying to focus on the tiny numbers of his father's watch. He gave up and reached for his glasses.

"Eleven." Dumbledore answered. "You missed your lesson this morning. I thought I'd come by and see that everything was in order."

"I'm sorry, Professor." Harry sighed, "I didn't realize it was so late."

"It's alright, Harry. Just tell me what happened last night."

Harry sat up, reliving it all again and swallowed a lump in his throat, a dull pain twisting in his chest. Malfoy, he saw, was still asleep.

"Sara was at our house." He lowered his eyes and spoke to the blankets, "I never saw her, but she was right there in the room with me. She talked to me before she vanished."

"Why do you think she was there?" Dumbledore wondered, stroking his beard.

"She leaves me things sometimes. Things that she buys for the house. I don't know what she brought last night. I forgot to look, but she left some stuff on the kitchen table."

"Harry, I know how difficult all this must be for you," he lifted the bottle of rum, "but this is no

answer."

"I know." Harry whispered, sinking back down into the soft pillows. He summoned his wand and conjured a canopy to keep out the intense sunlight and the heat it brought. "I won't miss my lesson again. I'm sorry I kept you waiting."

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"It's alright, Harry. As for apparating, I've opened the door for you and can do no more anyway. The rest will come only with practice."

"Then what's next?" Harry wondered.

"Do you remember performing wandless magic the morning we found Sara gone?"

Harry wrinkled his forehead, trying to recall such an event. "No, I don't."

"When you thought Severus was going to read your letter, you summoned it without your wand."

"I guess I did." Harry agreed, reminded of Snape lunging for the envelope and his own fear of it being read. "I did it the night I got Voldemort's cloak as well. I'd left my wand across the room, so I had no choice. I was shocked when it worked."

"It worked because you desperately wanted it to. That will be our next project. Wandless magic. Is tomorrow morning alright with you?"

"Certainly."

"And where are you and Mr. Malfoy going today?"

"To London. He needs some things from his house. He wants to go shopping, but I'm just not in the mood."

"Understandable." Dumbledore patted Harry's shoulder as he rose to his feet. "I'll have lunch sent up for you both."

"Thank you, sir." Harry muttered and let the bed swallow him again. Within minutes, he was fast asleep.

* * *

Snape had never been to Italy and even though he had been up very late with Sara, he had risen early and spent the hours wandering the grounds, surveying the damage from Sara's storm, appreciating the perfect warmth of the day and the postcard view of the Mediterranean. He'd made himself breakfast and was now preparing lunch, no thanks to the worthless muggle Sara referred to as her *assistant*, who was still very much asleep at noon. He had thought to bring a change of muggle clothes and was glad of the fact. The climate was a little much for the heavier robes he wore in the dungeons, which were cold even in summer.

To his surprise, Sara hadn't had a single drink during the night, even in the worst of her misery. He'd expected to find her inebriated upon his arrival, but she'd been stone sober and remained so. It almost made him smile, knowing she was really dealing with things now, not just drowning them out or ignoring them as he had watched her do for so long, suffering all the more for it. But the truth was, he had never seen a human being as morose and emotionally shattered as Sara was now. She shouldn't be alone, with just a muggle who could never comprehend what she was or what it meant to be who she is.

The worst part of it was, it was *Potter* that she needed to see, of this he was certain and he found it infuriating. Why Potter couldn't have ended up with Ginny Weasley, or anyone else for that matter, was beyond him. He had to adhere himself to Sara, who was so easily hurt, so trusting and so endearing. She would do anything for Harry Potter, even torture herself in this manner, surrendering whatever sense of self she had left in order to save his feelings. Snape scowled at the tea he was brewing, despising Potter with renewed enthusiasm. He couldn't even kill him now, because Sara would hate him for it. He found he wanted to grab Sara and shake some sense into her, but somehow he believed her when she said she knew what she was doing. He hoped she was right, for her sake. She was sitting up in bed when he went in and she smiled when she saw him, carrying a big tray, loaded with food and fresh flowers. He smiled in return as he set it down beside the bed.

"You look good." She said, her voice hoarse and quiet. "Grey, the new summer black."

Snape grinned, looking down a gray button down shirt and black trousers.

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Sara pointed her finger and turned his shirt blue. "There, that's better. A little color suits you, Severus."

"Thank you, my dear. How are you this morning? Or shall I say *afternoon*?"

"Better. I do believe that last night was the most horrible night of my life. I never knew such lows existed, that anything could be so painful. I'm glad you were here. I don't know what I would have done without you." She accepted the cup of tea he offered and sipped it. "How is Harry?"

"He's wretched. He's the Headmaster's new apprentice and has accepted the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher." Snape's brow furrowed at this and his eyes grew dark. "Last time I checked, dumb luck was not a requirement for Hogwarts employ."

Sara smiled and leaned back against the pillows. "A professor at Hogwarts. No wonder he couldn't decide what to do. It's perfect for him."

"If you say so. Personally, I think Mr. Potter is highly over-rated."

"I *know* what you think. We all do."

"Don't worry. The Headmaster will take good care of him. He wouldn't let anything happen to his famous pet wizard."

"Did I actually say I missed you?"

"My apologies." Snape conceded, "Actually, Potter is doing better. He was beyond reach for awhile,

but now Draco is staying at the school, in your tower as a matter of fact, and the two of them are miserable together. They go out drinking every night and sleep on the roof."

"*Draco and Harry?* They were together last night, but I never would picture them well, doing much of anything together."

"They bicker constantly, of course, they despise each other. I can't understand why Draco would subject himself to Potter's company to begin with."

"Because he *knows*," Sara said, her face going sullen. "They understand each other's pain."

Snape fell silent as Sara reflected, silently sipping her tea, wearing a white shirt that was far too big, the light covers pooled around her waist. Her hair stood out in stark contrast. Black. Every bit of it. Her eyebrows, lashes, everything. Not even a single blonde streak remained and to look at her was unnerving. Her face was pale, her skin dull and missing its satin sheen. "I'm glad he has someone." She finally said.

"I will stay with you, Sara. Now that I know the extent of your despair, I don't see how I can leave."

"I wish I could say yes. It's nice to have someone to talk to, especially you, Severus. You always listen. But I think what I like most about you is the way you're so brutally honest. I respect and appreciate that, even when you're infuriating." She smiled a little, "Stay a few days. If you leave now I think I'd crawl into a dark corner and never come out again."

"On one condition. You will summon me for absolutely any reason. Long before it becomes too much to bear."

"If I need a friend, Severus, I'll summon you. Your very presence makes me feel better. It's been so long since the night I left and I've spoken to no one but Mr. Sanders. Well, until last night. I spoke to Harry. And then I spoke to you."

"Why me?"

"Because you're the closest thing I have to a parent. I love you and I knew you'd be the least likely to drag me home. Like I said the night I left, you're the only one who would understand."

"Least likely to drag you home? Maybe, but you're wrong. As much as it kills me to say this, I think your Mr. Potter understands perfectly. He would try, of course, but if you said you wouldn't go he wouldn't make you."

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Sara's eyes filled with tears. "I can only hope he understands, but if I saw him, even for a moment, there would be no convincing. I could never say goodbye to Harry again." she dried her eyes before the tears could fall and got control of her emotions. When she spoke again, there was a numbness to her voice, a distance. "I almost died last night, Severus. I thought my heart had been torn from my chest as I laid there behind the sofa, listening to his voice, calling my name as he pleaded with me to show myself. I can't see him again after that. I wouldn't survive it."

Snape handed her a tissue and smiled. "I would gladly do away with him if it would solve the problem."

Sara laughed out loud as she sniffled. "Come on, bring that tray onto the veranda and I'll be right behind you. Have lunch with me."

Snape handed her a black robe from the bedpost and lifted the tray.

"Oh and Severus?" She called after him, "Don't duel with Harry. Unless you want to get yourself hurt."

* * *

Harry awoke around twelve-thirty to Malfoy standing over him, wearing Harry's clothes and fresh from the shower. "Well? Get up!"

"Go to hell, Malfoy," Harry mumbled and tried to duck back under the covers. He'd dreamed of Sara, as he often did, and wanted to be alone with his depression. Wallow in it for awhile. Think of her. Malfoy pulled the blankets away.

"I'm bored! That old goat woke me up and I've been waiting half an hour. I swear, there's nothing to do in this place! How can you stand it?"

"I don't need to be entertained. Now go away."

"No. Get up or I'm taking your port-key. I'll find my own way to London, perhaps in a fancy black car."

"Touch it and die."

"Nice mood *you're* in! Why don't you drink some of Snape's potion? It came with lunch."

Harry sat up, sliding on his glasses. "*Accio lunch*." The tray came flying at him and he caught it with one hand, but a glass of pumpkin juice kept its momentum and left the tray, its contents ahead of it. Harry threw up a hand to protect his face. "*Stop!*" he said and suddenly the liquid froze, the glass dangled in the air.

"So that's what the old geezer was talking about! You *can* do wandless magic!"

"Evidently."

"Now get it back in the glass." Draco smirked.

Harry sighed and summoned his wand. "*Reverso*." The glass settled onto the tray, the pumpkin juice flowing back into it. He smirked half-heartedly at Malfoy.

"Show-off. Now drink the potion so we can go. I'm bored."

An hour later Harry parked the car on Knightbridge in front of Harvey Nichols. Shopping was the last thing in the world he wanted to do, except maybe shopping with Draco Malfoy. There was no worse punishment and he wondered what he had done to deserve this.

They shopped for hours. Draco took his time and chose very carefully, comparing fabrics and cuts and

colors. He tried everything on and gave the over-courteous staff a hard time. He was demanding and somewhat impossible.

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Harry, on the other hand, chose what appealed to him, he knew his sizes and assumed everything would fit, which it always did. He declined help and wandered about the store, waiting for something to catch his eye. Harry was waiting in a chair, surrounded by bags and starving to death by the time Draco decided it was time to go get dinner.

They ate at the Savoy hotel and by the time they made it to Malfoy's mini-mansion, it was passing twilight. Draco hesitated before unlocking the door and Harry could see he was nervous. He checked the locator, but found they were not currently in peril. "Come on, Malfoy." He urged, "This place gives me the creeps. Let's get in and out."

Harry was on edge, watching the door of the enormous master suite as Draco quickly got what he needed, neatly piling clothes, shoes, and necessities into a dragon hide travel bag. He quickly took a framed photograph off the head of his bed and stashed it away before Harry could see what it was. He could only imagine who Draco might have a picture of. Miniaturizing his ridiculous silk bathrobe so it wouldn't wrinkle and laying it across the top, Draco finally shouldered the bag and together, they hurried down the hall.

Draco did his best to keep Harry's pace, who seemed intent on practically running out of the house. He didn't blame Harry, for being here after dark was nerve-racking enough after last time, with someone lurking silently as they drank daiquiris with no inkling of danger. Maybe it was his fear of Voldemort, but his unease was mounting.

"Something doesn't feel right." Harry whispered, slowing his pace.

"I've got a bad feeling, Potter." Draco replied, his voice hushed and shaky, keeping close to Harry as they moved cautiously down the hall.

Suddenly Harry stopped. "Draco." He said, swallowing a lump in his throat, "I think we're surrounded."

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21. Masterpiece Theater

"Just don't panic." Harry said, his voice low and controlled. "You take the ones to the left, I'll cover my side." He could hear movement at both ends of the hall and knew they had precious few seconds to prepare a defense.

"It sounds like *lots* of them." Draco said, his voice shaky, terrified, and pitched too high.

He's Panicking. Harry thought with alarming urgency. Clearly, Draco would be of little use. Harry looked around, finding only a few paintings, then he suddenly sprung into action, pulling a heavy old frame off the wall, a sinister face in oils, bearing the likeness of the Malfoy lineage and wearing yesterday's clothes. He kept his voice as low as possible, hearing the scuffle of footsteps only moments away, and performed a difficult charm that Dumbledore had taught him only yesterday. The painting transfigured into a shield bearing the crest of Gryffindor, charmed for strength and able to repel most curses. This he shoved in Draco's hands. "Take this." He said and that's when the Death eaters arrived.

He blocked the few attempts they made before he cast a ward in the corridor which gave him a fleeting moment, using Draco and the shield for cover, he summoned another painting, performing the charm as it crossed the short distance, just as the Death eaters countered his ward.

Draco's loud, irregular breathing was getting on his nerves. Harry hadn't heard him cast one spell and knew he was cowering behind the shield. The hooded figures were slowly advancing, and had closed a considerable distance on Draco's side. To make matters worse, any of the ten or so in front of Harry that he managed to take down, were quickly revived by their companions. Their numbers remained strong.

"Draco!" Harry yelled.

"What?" He squeaked. "I'm busy."

"What's through that door?"

Draco glanced over, "Nuh, nothing."

"Come on!" Back to back and hidden behind the huge, but feather light shields, Harry led Draco to the door. He could feel Malfoy shaking with fear and he was relieved to pull him to safety. Or so he thought. Three Death eaters guarded the room in an obvious trap.

With Death eaters pressing in on both sides of the hall, some now pounding on the door and blasting it with spells, three more in the room, and others peering in through the windows, they were goners. If not for the shields, they'd already be dead.

"*Impedimenta!*" Harry bellowed, slowing the advancing three to a crawl, giving him just enough time to seal the door, which was about to give, even though he had Draco pushed up against it, making use of his shield and keeping him from harm. The Death eaters were shaking off of the hindrance, so Harry wasted no time. "*Stupefy!*" He watched them fall and, just for good measure, he threw on a full body bind.

Safe for the moment, Harry grabbed Malfoy by the arms, their shields clamoring to the floor. He was enraged, his words brash and loud. "*What the hell are you doing? Damn it Malfoy, don't you dare get me killed! Calm down RIGHT NOW!*" He shoved Draco against the wall and paced the small room. He tried one of his carving spells, but knew they didn't work on warded walls. He racked his brain for ideas and scoured the room for weapons, but to no avail.

"Get me out of here, Harry. I'll give you a million galleons, just don't let them take me." His voice

sounded on the edge of terror and Harry sighed.

"Show me your picture. The one you put in your bag. Who is it of?"

"No one. Forget it. I'm not showing it to you."

"Alright then, when they get through that door, like you know they will, it's every wizard for himself."

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The fear in Draco's eyes almost made Harry feel bad, but it didn't look like either of them would be around much longer, so he supposed it made no difference. He saw no viable way out. Evidently, neither did Draco.

"Fine then. You won't like it, though. Don't say I didn't warn you." He slung the bag off his shoulder and quickly pulled out the picture, handing it hesitantly to Harry.

His eyes softened, his thumb lightly brushing the glass. "I thought you hated her?" He asked, mildly surprised as he regarded the muggle photo of Draco dancing with Sara at the Yule Ball.

"I didn't *then*." Draco said with wounded eyes. "Besides, *you* got all the memories, Potter. I only have this *one*."

"Here." He handed it back. "Put it away."

Harry looked at the locator, just to make sure he was still in mortal peril and was dismayed to see that he was. Ron was "*shopping*", Sara was perpetually "*traveling*" and Hermione was once again still at work after nine o'clock at night. Fact checkers only worked during the day, but if he knew Hermione, she was reading up on something. It pained him to know he wouldn't get to say goodbye to them.

Malfoy shouldered his bag and looked at Harry, lost and expectant, like he was waiting for instructions. Harry sighed. "Draco, we'll get out of this, you'll see." He hoped Malfoy didn't realize that he didn't believe this at all. "Use your shield. Don't let anyone get behind you, and don't back yourself into a corner. If you panic again, you'll get us killed. Do you understand? You're the most stubborn and confident person I know. You can do this."

Malfoy swallowed hard and said nothing.

"The port-keys are in the car. If we can get to them, we'll be okay. It's gonna have to be the window."

"No way! There are *dozens* of them out there! We'll never make it!"

"We might, but we're sitting ducks in here. Tell me, how long do you think we can keep them out? If we can get outside, I can get us to the car." Hopefully, he thought, it would be one of the 5 times out of ten his apparating skills functioned on command.

They wouldn't get the chance. The door blew off its hinges and the room swarmed with Deathaters, advancing quickly. They barely had time to grab their shields and hid behind them as they backed side by side into the window. Dark cloaks crowded the glass outside and Malfoy started to lose it again.

"*Draco!*" Harry pleaded, "Think of something!"

Harry tossed worthless curses at them, even tried another ward, which didn't even have time to take hold. Draco began reciting something strange and Harry thought for sure he'd finally cracked up, but suddenly, he bolted to his feet, his wand held out before him, shooting black smoke into the sea of Deathaters, who collapsed as soon as they came in contact with it.

Harry stood in shock, unable to believe what he was seeing. Every one of them was crumpled on the floor. "What the *hell* was *that*?"

"Dark magic, Potter. You can be sure I'll see Azkaban for that one."

"Are they dead?"

"Some."

Harry grabbed Draco's arm. "Come on! Let's make a break for it."

Running dead out and without caution, they barreled through the halls toward the front doors.

"Hurry!" Draco called over his shoulder, "It's right around this corner!"

They ran straight into the strong arms of two cloaked men, surrounded by at least thirty others. Draco screamed and fell on the floor.

Harry felt panic rise in his throat and he struggled to back away, pushing and pulling, striking out at his captor. "*Let me go!*" he yelled, but large hands held him fast.

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"*Mr. Potter!*"

Harry stopped struggling at the voice and quickly realized his mistake. The robe before him bore the welcome crest of none other than the Ministry of Magic.

"Aurors!" He cried, "Draco! They're *Aurors*!"

Malfoy accepted a hand up, suddenly quite composed, and straightened his clothes. "I knew that."

"There are dozens!" Harry informed them, "They're everywhere!"

"Search the house." This one who bore the three golden rings of captain around his sleeve commanded. Instantly most of the group dispersed.

"But how did you know?" Harry wondered, "No one even knew we were here!"

"Neither did we." The captain told him, "We picked up a large concentration of wizards at this address. I was about to send a few men to check it out when someone you know came bursting through the door." The captain turned toward the front door and motioned for his man there to bring this someone in.

She was crying, had her wand out, and appeared fiercely determined to do *something*. Her expression melted when she saw Harry.

"*Hermione*." He whispered, a smile touching his lips.

"Harry!" She ran the length of the foyer, throwing her arms around him and breathing a sigh of relief. He hugged her tight as she sniffled on his shoulder. "We're alright. Everything's okay now."

"I was so scared." She whispered as Draco stood by, watching them. "They were all around the house and then when I saw the Dark Mark... I knew you would be okay, Harry. I knew we would get here in time."

"Thanks, Hermione. We really needed a bit of help, as you can see."

They pulled away and she cast Malfoy a hateful side-glance that Harry didn't catch. "You only have yourself and Ron to thank." She held up her locator on its long gold chain, "Your choice of Christmas presents may have just saved your life."

He hugged her again and kissed her cheek. "Come on, I don't want to spend another minute in this cursed house." He glanced over his shoulder, "Let's go, Malfoy. Let's get out of here."

* * *

Sara sat at the small table in her room, wrapping a box with shiny paper, a big silver bow set aside for when she was done. She took great care to make it perfect and did it by hand for a more personal touch. She had already written the note she planned to tape to the top, but had mixed feelings about including it. She had to, she knew, after many hours of discussion with Severus, it became perfectly clear that this was the only path she could take. In the end, it would be better for both of them. After the scare, Sara was finding it hard to concentrate. Her eyes kept roaming back to the Orb, longing to get just one more glance at him before she made it final. The sense she'd had, first of anxiety, dread, and then real fear, had come during desert after a late dinner with Severus. She'd known Harry was in great danger, even before the locator had confirmed it. She couldn't imagine Harry, the fearless seeker, the honored hero, feeling such apprehension over *anything*. It had to be a substantial threat for him to react in such a way, but courage and determination rushed over her through the Fortificus charm. Draco was another story, but she felt them both so strongly, it sent her running for the Orb of Arassel.

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"*Show me Draco.*" She had said and found herself looking at Harry, his expression fierce, angry and grave. He was shouting and Sara could feel that he was scared. ...*Malfoy, don't you dare get me killed!*... echoed through her mind and her eyes were glued to the scene in the Orb. Malfoy was completely terrified. He was helpless, vulnerable and more afraid of the threat than of death. He wanted his father.

She could sense doubt very strongly from both of them. The situation was hopeless it seemed and the next image was a dark agony. Death eaters, at least fifteen or twenty, stormed the room and all was lost. She felt their desperation, their certainty of defeat and Sara panicked, screaming at the Orb to please not fade away, to show her Harry, which she knew it would not, but it wouldn't show her Draco, either. She collapsed into a chair and sobbed to the room, staring at the Orb.

Within seconds the picture perfect sky clouded over, blackening like it was night and the wind picked up as the rain pounded the earth in torrents. Things began to blow over on the veranda and the sea swelled dangerously, battering the coast and the walls beneath the palazzo. Windows were torn from their frames, the roof blew off the cabana outside and the trees were tossed and bent, their fortitude no match for a raging hurricane.

Snape came running. She tried to tell him what she'd seen, the undeniable mortification she'd sensed, but her words were lost in her tears. Her hands reached up to hide her face and she cried into them, her heart twisted and shattered as Severus pulled her into an embrace. Sara cried on his shoulder as the storm intensified, the glass panels gone and the wind whipping in, stirring everything and toppling the lamps. Things crashed all around them near and far and Snape had to yell for her to hear.

"Sara, *do something!* You've got to *calm down!*"

She couldn't. She tried, but she was sure Harry and Draco were dead. Why else would the Orb refuse to show her? And here she was, too far removed to help them. With each thought her fear pushed her further into misery and the tears fell faster, the storm growing more and more destructive and frightening.

The last thing Sara heard was "*Stupefy!*" Snape caught her as she fell and carried her to the bed. He wiped the tears from her face and covered her with a light blanket.

She awoke to Severus' kind face, his wand held out before him. He smiled when she opened her eyes.

"*Harry!*" She said, her eyes full of alarm.

"Check that gadget you wear. He's fine."

Sara grabbed the locator and erupted into choked tears of relief when she saw he was "*traveling*". She laughed as they rolled down her face, providing a light summer shower in the now peaceful night. "I thought I'd lost him." She cried, "The Orb showed me that Voldemort's followers had them cornered. Draco was so scared, Severus, and Harry... well, Harry expected the worst for both of them."

"Potter's got extraordinary luck. I'm not surprised to see he's still breathing. I wouldn't worry so much about it. Anyway, I had that worthless muggle stay with you while I surveyed the damage. I was able to fix a few things, but the locals are all out doing the same."

"Just leave it. I'll pay for the repairs." She sighed as his face grew serious.

"You *have* to control yourself, Sara. You can't destroy *whole towns* over Harry Potter."

"You're right of course, but you could never know how awful it was, thinking Harry was dead. It was the blackest moment of my life, Severus. Anyone else would have reacted the same way. I didn't mean to damage the town."

"Of course not, my dear." He sat on the edge of the bed, "But you must find alternate ways to react. Screaming would suffice. Anything but that horrible *wretchedness*."

"I'll try. That's one of the reasons I left after all. To get a handle on the Elemental in me, but you can't

expect miracles over night. I need time."

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"That you have. I didn't mean to imply you could flip a switch, Sara. Do whatever you have to do. But if I may make a suggestion, I think you should put that thing away. You can't focus on yourself when you're staring at *that* every five minutes. It isn't healthy."

She nodded and sighed heavily. Hesitantly, Sara lifted the gold chain over her head, got up, and put it in a drawer.

"Good." He said, getting to his feet, "I'll make some tea if you'd like."

"Thank you." She smiled, sad and quiet, "Tea would be nice." He left the room and it was then that she sat down to wrap the box. She had to go back to the cottage and the sooner she got it over with, the better. She added the bow and taped it in place.

She was startled when a man's voice spoke inside her head, whispering to her from beneath a tree just outside, asking her to come out. She could picture him there, just as he'd been when she saw him in Rome and wearing the same odd clothes. Again she got a strange sense of danger, but not of menace. Her curiosity took her onto the veranda.

She had never used telepathy before. She had never encountered another wizard who had a strong capability and knew how to use it. Sara voiced a silent reply, pushing it toward the figure under the palmetto. *Do not come near.* She told him, *You're a dark wizard. Leave at once!*

Come out! He argued, *I carry a message from the village of Keltse-tia. I mean you no harm.*

At the mention of the ancient Gypsy town where her grandmother had lived, Sara hurried across the grass, cautious, but excited. She stopped ten feet from where he stood.

"You were following me." She accused, "I saw you in Rome. And where did you hear the name *Keltse-tia*? I demand to know."

"I was waiting for the right moment to approach you. When you came out of the shop, I feared your wrath. I have no wish to anger you, *nikita*, for your strength is legend. I brought you the lighthouse as an apology." He smiled, his eyes much, much older than his face and Sara's heart pounded in her chest, the danger radiating from him, putting her on edge. "As for the town, I live in the enchanted wood on it's outskirts."

"Why would they send a messenger in the form of a dark sorcerer, for surely that's what you are."

"You are right to feel fear in my presence, as mortal blood still runs through your veins. I am a wizard no longer, though I *am* a dark creature of sorts, but one who means you no harm, as I said."

"What are you talking about? Speak sense to me or our time here is done."

"My name is Nikolae. I am *wampyre*." He stepped out of shadow and into the silvery light of the moon. Sara stood her ground.

"Nonsense. Vampires are senseless, vicious, and feral. Not to mention hideous. You are none of those, obviously."

"There are a small number of us that somehow maintained our intellect. While we are hideous like you say, we manage to go through the change with our minds intact."

"You look like any average person to me."

"There is an old wizard in the woods who will occasionally sell us polyjuice potion for the galleons and muggle money we take from our victim's pockets. This is not *me* you see before you, but the ghost of a man who is now dead."

Sara eyed him distrustfully. "Deliver your message."

The vampire spoke at once. "Do not travel to Romania. There are many English wizards waiting for you there. I myself have seen them holding late night meetings in the forest and can assure you, a great number are gathering in anticipation of your arrival. You will not be contacted again until it is safe for you."

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"Are the Gypsies in danger?"

"No, nothing they can't handle." He pulled something from his pocket, "But they knew you wouldn't trust a *wampyre*. They sent this."

Sara took the item from his hand and looked at it, a force of power rushing through her as she touched it. A long, flat rectangle three inches long and an inch wide, a lock of gray hair frozen in the middle. She knew immediately it what was and she was grateful to have it. "How is she?" She asked the vampire.

"Bed-ridden and often quite mad, but alive. The others say she has a few years left. Don't worry, there's plenty of time."

"I suppose that's true." Sara conceded, "According to legend, she won't live past my 20th birthday. I can only hope the threat subsides before then. Thank you for the message. And when you return, thank her for me. The Celestone is much appreciated."

"Of course. I hope one day we meet again, but never fear me, *nikita*, I would protect you at all costs."

"Thank you." She smiled, "Now return to your home. Your job is done."

The vampire bowed to her and turned away, vanishing as he had done in Rome. He didn't apperate, she realized, it was pure speed that allowed him to move so fast and in a flash, he was gone. Sara went back to her room.

* * *

Once back in the car, Draco turned to Harry. "You lied for me, Potter." Draco smiled, "I'm impressed."

"Don't read too much into it, Malfoy. You did what you had to do to save our lives. I can't see you go

to Azkaban for it. Besides, I rather *appreciated* your Dark magic tonight and that guy was a little shift, anyway."

"He's been to the Manor before. He's the one who ordered me detained when my father was killed."

"He was friends with Lucius?"

"My father had no friends, Potter. No Slytherin really does, only allies and windows of opportunity."

"A traitor, regardless. I got that feeling."

"I almost died when you told him the spell was aimed at us and must have backfired. Brilliant, blaming the Death Eaters for their own demise."

"Well if it wasn't us, who else could it be?" Harry reasoned as he made a left into a driveway and brought the car to a stop.

"True." Draco sighed, "I'm just having a hard time believing it actually happened. I should be dead right now, or worse!"

"One piece of advice, Malfoy." Harry shut off the engine, "No more do-it-yourself wards. Obviously, you don't know the first thing about protecting a house. Get some help next time before you get yourself killed for real."

"Oh shove off." Draco scowled as he got out of the car, "They must have found a way to remove them."

Harry smirked, "A pack of *muggles* could have taken them off, Malfoy! You heard the Aurors, there were *no wards* on your house!" Harry laughed, unable to help it. "Excellent job, I must say."

"Best grades in Slytherin House!" Draco defended, "And first pick for Prefect. My accomplishments outweigh your insults, *Potter*."

Harry tried to disguise a laugh and turned his back to ring the doorbell.

"Oh shut-up." Draco crossed his arms, defeated. "I just got out of school, you know."

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Hermione opened the door, having been sent home by the Ministry while Harry and Draco gave their statements. She smiled bright and warm at Harry, her face soured when she turned to Malfoy.

"Oh, shove off, Granger." He mumbled, "It's not like I *want* to be here." He pushed past her and went inside without her invitation.

Hermione's mouth fell open at the audacity. "I see you're still rude and assuming, *Malfoy*." She took Harry's arm and pulled him through the door. They followed Draco as he wandered the small rooms until he found the couch and sat down.

"It could be worse." He announced, looking around, "A step up for Weasley. Nice furniture, though."

"Gee, thanks." She rolled her eyes, "It was a gift from Sara."

"Well that explains why something nice is in *your* house. It's terribly out of place. Or wait, this isn't even a whole house is it?"

Hermione drew her wand, but Harry stayed her hand. "We've had enough curses for one day. Don't let him upset you, Hermione. Your flat is great. I love it. Besides, do you really care what *he* thinks?"

She put her wand away. "He's just so... *repellent*!"

Malfoy smirked at her from the couch.

"Don't move." She told him and pulled Harry back into the dining room. "Harry, why are you hanging around with him to begin with? You won't answer our letters and here it is four weeks later and this is how I find you! Surrounded by Death Eaters and in the company of Draco Malfoy! I don't understand. How could you ignore us in favor of *him*?"

"It's hard to explain."

A bustle came through the door and they turned to find Ron hurrying in. A huge smile bloomed on his face when he saw his visitor. "Harry! It's about time you showed up. We were worried, you know."

"I'm sorry." Harry said, but attempted no explanation. "It's good to see you both."

Before Hermione could warn him, Ron went into the living room. "Come sit down, Harry, tell us—"

Ron's voice suddenly grew considerably louder, "What the bloody hell are *you* doing here? *Get out of my house!*"

"Is that how you treat your guests, Weasel?" Draco asked as he browsed through a magazine, not bothering to so much as glance at Ron.

Ron had his wand out, but this time it was Hermione who came to Draco's rescue. "Wait, Ron. I think you should hear this."

"Hear *what*? Harry, why didn't you take care of this?"

Harry looked Ron in the eye, his hands clasped behind his back. "Because I brought him here."

Two hours later, the four of them sat around the second-hand table in the kitchen, sipping mixed drinks, the story told. Malfoy had joined in the discussion when it was about the ambush, but the moment it turned to Sara he fell silent.

Both Hermione and Ron said they were glad she left. They felt terrible for Harry, of course, but they had seen Sara's decent first hand and objectively. Unlike Harry, who's own emotions restricted him to an inside view. They were confident she would return.

Harry smiled, glad to be with them again, not understanding why he had avoided his best friends for so long. He felt better after hearing their words, for what they said made sense to him and for the first time he felt optimistic.

A clock on the wall tolled midnight and Hermione smiled. "Happy birthday, Harry."

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"Yeah," Ron grinned, "Happy birthday. I'm glad you lived to see it." He gave Malfoy a small smile, which almost left Harry speechless.

"Thank you." Harry smiled, realizing he was now eighteen.

"Is it your birthday, Potter? Well then, we must have another drink." Malfoy said and polished off his glass. Apparently, Finnegan's Swill could almost make Malfoy likable and Hermione made them all another drink. Draco had fallen mostly into charming mode, but couldn't let go of his rude sense of humor. "Oh and keep mine separate." He instructed her, "I don't want to end up with *Weasley's* glass."

Hermione slammed his drink down before him. "I hope you choke on it." She smirked and left the room.

Ron was angry. "Don't give her a hard time." He warned. "Or you'll deal with me."

Malfoy tried to hide his amusement.

Harry grinned. "You might want to remember, Draco, that Ron has five older brothers and he's bigger than you."

Just as Malfoy opened his mouth to retort, Hermione returned with brightly wrapped gifts for Harry and piled them on the table. We only had these two, but owls must have dropped the others off here. Fred and George sent you something, which I hope you'll open outside."

"And here's one from Mum and Dad." Ron announced, looking at a tag.

"This one's from Charlie. And one from Bill."

"Uh, this is from Ginny." Ron said, his expression uncertain as he slid the gift across the table. "Why don't you save it for later. You'll want something to open when you wake up."

"Thanks, I think I will." He said, setting it on top of the gift from Fred and George. *It's probably a port-key to hell.* He thought and sighed, wishing he'd never kissed Ginny because she hated him for it. Charlie had sent him one of the coolest things he'd ever received. A dragon-hide cloak that was light as a feather and charmed for strength. His letter said it could not be cut by a sword and would protect the wearer from assault. It was waterproof, fire-proof, warming in cold and cooling in heat. It was black with a fascinating red and gold shimmer that drew the eye and mesmerized. Even Malfoy jumped up to check it out.

Another box contained two items, a maroon sweater with a big yellow fire bolt on the front, which Ron laughed at and begged him to put on. Harry argued that it was too hot and set it aside. Malfoy was on the verge of hysterics, laughing so hard he had to hold his stomach. Hermione couldn't help but smile, and hid her chuckles behind her hand.

There was also a muggle penlight, charmed to emit a blinding, stadium quality arc of light that could illuminate practically any size space in the dark. All things considered, Harry decided it was a handy thing to have, for no wand burned this bright. Ron grabbed it at pointed it in Draco's eyes, blinding him for several minutes. Even Harry laughed as he carried on and on about *permanent damage*.

Bill had sent him an Egyptian dagger, the hilt of which was silver and carved with images and hieroglyphics and ended in a gold Sphinx head. Hermione claimed it said something about a phoenix and promised to look the rest up later.

Ron gave him a chess board, beautifully carved from crystal and volcanic glass. Hermione's gift was a very old book called "*Countering The Dark Arts: A Wizard's Guide*." as well as an expensive red tie which he made up his mind to wear the very first day of class..

"I thought you could get some ideas for your lesson plan, Harry. There's a lot of helpful stuff in there we weren't taught at Hogwarts."

"Thanks Hermione! I really don't know *what* to teach the new 7th years. They were drinking on the roof with us just a few weeks ago. It's bizarre. They're our classmates after all."

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"You'll do fine, Harry. Remember, you've taught Potions already and you did well. Defense against the Dark Arts is your *best subject!* They'll be lucky to have you as their teacher and they *know* it. You'll see."

Draco snickered.

Ron's brow furrowed. "Maybe not the bloody *Slytherins*. They get their Dark Arts education *at home!*"

Draco scowled at Ron and Harry thought it was time to get Malfoy out of there.

Promising to come back over the weekend, they said their goodbyes and Harry carried his gifts out to the car. Draco opened the boot and he piled them in. Getting back behind the wheel, he turned to Draco. "You could be a little nicer when your're a guest in someone's home."

"What? It's just Granger and the Weasel. Who cares?"

"I do. *They're my friends.*"

Draco said nothing. He sighed as Harry backed out of the driveway and headed into London. It must be nice, he thought, having people be genuinely thrilled to see you, friends who cried when they thought you were hurt, and who put a lot of thought into the gifts they gave you. Friends who worried when they didn't hear from you, even though they knew right where you were and that you were fine. Slytherins didn't work that way. Not really. Slytherins had cold, selfish hearts.

* * *

Sara left the gift on the kitchen table and picked up the note.

I'm sorry about last night. I shouldn't have reacted the way I did. It's just that I miss you so much that it hurts. I didn't mean to make you cry, Sara, I love you.

I like the things you brought for the tunnel. How did you know? Stupid thing to ask a diviner, I guess. If you want to see it, all you need is a DIAMOND TIARA. It's right where I said it would be. I think I might have the cellar dug, just so I can put in the stairway and maybe cut a little room here or there. I

only hope it's to your liking.

I hope you are well, Sara. You've been gone so long now that I can't help but wonder when you're coming back? Or if you ever will. How are things going? Are you any better? Can't I make you happy? Or am I just being selfish? All I can do is ask you again to come home to me.

Love, Harry

Sara bowed her head as she folded the note and slipped it into her pocket. She left the letter she'd written on top of Harry's birthday gift, checked the locator, which she'd brought along to make sure there wasn't a recurrence of last night, and saw that Harry was still "*sleeping*". She grabbed a flashlight and went down to the cliff.

* * *

For the first time, Harry went into his office. He had been here before, of course, but never while it was so empty, so *vacant*. He carried a box full of different things and he set this on his desk for unpacking.

Ginny's gift was a bronze paperweight in the shape of an apple, and this he took from the pocket of his robe, placing it on the desk. She would be his student, he realized and wondered how awkward it would be. Already he didn't know how to act toward her and the fact that she forgave him, according to the note she'd sent, only complicated matters. Again he thought Dumbledore was making a mistake and set his eyes on the box.

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He put some reference books on a shelf, hung a few pictures on the wall and was done. He sighed as he stepped back to survey his office. It looked even *more* empty. Obviously, he would need to make a trip to Diagon Alley.

He found Malfoy on the roof, his elbows leaning on the wall, his face in his hands. He didn't seem to be looking out at the view.

"What's up?" Harry asked, knowing that Malfoy could only be thinking about Voldemort and the fact that he only had a month left before the deadline.

"Nothing."

"Have you decided what you're going to do?"

"Yeah. I'm going to have a glass of wine before dinner, and after? Maybe something stronger."

"Again?"

Malfoy went to his bed and came back with a box wrapped in plain paper. This he handed to Harry. "I didn't know today was your birthday, but I managed to scrounge something up."

Harry was almost afraid. Fred and George's present had exploded in a flurry of confetti, but a gift from Malfoy had him scared. He hesitated and Draco's forehead creased.

"Well it's not a *bomb*, Potter. Open it or I'm taking it back."

Harry opened it and was shocked to find a four hundred year old bottle of scotch whiskey. "I don't know what to say." He admitted, "This is, well, *unexpected*. How did you ever get this?"

"I took a port-key out of Hogsmead and went to the Manor. It was my father's. We'll drink it after dinner."

"We can't open this! It's from the 1500's!"

"Alright then, we'll wait a few more hundred years. Really, how old do you want it to get? Would *you* drink something that had been laying around for a millennia?"

"Well, when you put it that way. Thanks, Malfoy."

"No problem. I'll be dead in a month anyway."

Harry's face turned red. "You won't be *dead* unless you do something stupid!"

"I've got a plan, Potter. Don't worry about it." Draco turned away from the wall and smiled. "What else did you get for your birthday?"

Harry fell onto his bed and pulled out the gifts that had come from Sirius, Seamus, Neville, and even the Dursley's. Harry had written them a brief note a week before, telling them that he was staying at school and that he and Sara were putting their plans on hold while he studied with the Headmaster and adjusted to the title of 'Professor'. He'd wanted to assure them that he was doing fine on his own. In reality, he thought, it was yet to be proven, he hadn't done well so far, and he doubted they even cared. His Aunt Petunia sent him one of Uncle Vernon's old ties. It was ugly, too wide, and a little frayed, but he put it on now, looped loosely around his neck. It looked ridiculous, especially with his casual shirt and Harry and Draco made jokes about it until they were laughing so hard that conversation stopped altogether.

"I've missed something funny, it seems." Dumbledore smiled as he came onto the roof.

"We were just admiring Harry's new tie from his Aunt and Uncle. It's rather fetching if you ask me."

Harry burst into another fit of laughter.

"I do say, that *is* a most interesting tie, Harry." Dumbledore smiled, "but one has to wonder what your aunt was thinking when she gave it to you?"

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Draco grinned. "I'll bet she was thinking '*now how can I get rid of this tie?*'."

"I don't think she was thinking at all." Harry said, the laughter subsiding. "The funny thing is, this is the nicest thing she's ever given me, except for my father's watch, which was already mine."

"Where did you get those *socks*?" Draco nearly shouted, noticing Harry's mismatched and very colorful socks for the first time.

"Dobby. I woke up this morning and he was standing on the bed, staring at me. He's afraid of you, Malfoy. He didn't dare make a sound."

"Dobby never gave *me* a birthday present!"

"That's because you're a sinister tyrant."

Dumbledore looked at the sky in exasperation. "It doesn't take a wise man to know where this conversation is heading. I ask that you please refrain from insulting each other until I am out of earshot. Harry, I have brought you a gift."

"Not fair!" Draco objected, "You let Potter get the last word!"

"Wrong, Mr. Malfoy. *I* had the last word."

"Yes, sir." Draco gracefully acquiesced and sat back down on the bed to see what Harry got.

"It's a pensieve." Harry said, curiously turning what looked like a shell-shaped basin in his hands.

"I thought there might be a few memories you wanted to *set aside*." Dumbledore gave a knowing and compassionate smile. "You can always retrieve them later."

"But what if it's something I *want to know*, just don't want to think of?"

"You'll still remember, but the entire memory, along with most of the imagery, will be taken away. You could say one removes the novel and is left with the outline."

"Thank you, Professor." Harry smiled, "I'm sure I'll get a lot of use out of this."

"I like it." Draco determined, "Ever try to tell someone about an experience you had, or a funny moment you can't seem to recapture in the telling? With this, you could just pull it out and let someone see for themselves."

"True," Dumbledore agreed, "but one must be careful of the memories he shares. Some things are better left unseen. Otherwise, it's quite useful in that area."

"Gives a whole new meaning to '*you had to be there*.'" Harry grinned.

"I'll have to get one. Next time I'm in Diagon Alley."

Dumbledore got to his feet, but only made it a few yards when he turned and looked at Draco over his half-moon spectacles. "Mr. Malfoy, I'd like to speak to you. I would appreciate it if you would come to my office after dinner."

"Yes, sir." Draco sighed, dismayed and a little nervous.

* * *

Harry sat at the table, the gift before him, wrapped in shiny purple paper and with a big silver bow on top. He held the letter in his hands, unopened, and decided it would stay that way, at least for now. He ran a finger over the smooth surface of his present, a soft smile on his face.

He noticed the pieces of scotch tape, uneven cuts, and botched folding and had to smile, knowing she had wrapped it with her own two hands and had used no magic to do it. The small gesture meant a lot to him and he removed the wrapping carefully, folding it and setting it aside. Inside the box was a journal.

Harry fit the little key into the lock and read what she wrote on the inside cover.

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I miss you every moment of every day, and you are forever on my mind, so I bought one of these for myself just last week so I could have an outlet for my sorrow. A place to confide the things I can't tell anyone else. Things only you would understand.

In my journal I write all the things I want you to know, but never told you, the good and the bad, and I write as if you may one day read my words. What it ended up becoming is a long, sad love letter where I pour my emotions onto the page and where I put all the mundane day to day things I might have told you if we were together. Every entry is addressed to you, as if it's a letter I mean to send, and it has helped me immensely in such a short time.

I know I've hurt you. I can only hope this helps.

Happy birthday, Harry.

Love Always, Sara

With somber eyes, Harry put the book back in its box with the square of shiny paper and carefully attached the silver bow to the top. Without a second thought, he went down to the cliff and apparated, after three tries, into the boat.

He smiled as he left the tunnel and glided into the cave, the muted glow of the sand under the water and the warm glow of the fires welcomed him and Harry smiled. He loved this place, he realized, and had some more work he wanted to do, but it would wait for another day. He wanted only to sit here in his little boat, hidden from all the world, in a place only he knew about. Well, now Sara knew about it, too, and that was even better.

His eyes scanned the landing, the maritime figures in their places, the brass lighthouse shining brightly in a niche on the back wall that seemed to have been made especially for it alone. A large blank spot in the middle where he would eventually carve their crest and later fit it with ceramic inlays. His eyes turned to the other side and wandered over his stalactite trees, stopping on the nearest one, aglow in the light of two torches. He smiled at what was carved there as a knife went straight through his chest. A heart struck through with an arrow, the initials *H.P. + S.L.* inscribed inside it.

* * *

Draco had brought the scotch to dinner and was *letting it breathe* when Harry arrived. The others were half done with their meals and he apologized for his lateness. He hadn't planned on spending twenty minutes reflecting on his life in the cave, though he had left it having made a few decisions, ones that would be hard to uphold, but he was determined to follow through. Dumbledore was right. He was not who he wanted to be when he finally saw his Sara again.

He rushed through his dinner, barely tasting the food, ravenous and not wanting to hold anyone up.

Dobby was by his side, insisting he eat slower.

"Dobby," Harry said in between bites, drawing his wand to summon a chair, "sit down. Have desert with us."

Dobby stood nervously by the empty chair, resting a tentative hand on the seat. "Dobby is not allowed to sit at the head table with wizards, sir. Even though he is most wanting to have desert with Harry Potter on his *birthday*."

"Then why can't you? Certainly you have permission."

Dobby's large pointed ears flattened in shame as he looked back at the other house elves, gathered outside the kitchen door.

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Malfoy grinned and rose to his feet, his bellowing voice echoing through the deserted great hall. He glanced once at the gathering of elves before turning his cold glare on Dobby. "Sit down immediately! You'll do as you're told or you'll get this fork in the back of your hand!" He lowered himself into his chair as the elves scurried back through the door, terrified. Dobby scrambled into the chair, shaking, his ears all but lifeless and his big eyes looking straight at the floor. "That should do it." Draco said and smiled, quite proud of himself. "Now your little friends think you're just doing as you're told." Dumbledore looked unusually flustered and had been silent throughout dinner. "Draco, I do believe you've just frightened that poor creature half to death."

"Well I didn't mean to scare *him*. I just wanted to get rid of the midget lynch mob." He sighed, looking at the crumpled little form with the wilted ears in the chair across from him. "Dobby. You can leave if you want. I wasn't really going to stab you."

Harry pushed his plate away, wondering what was for desert. He was still a little hungry, but wanted to save room for Lucius Malfoy's premium stock. His lip curled in a smile at this thought and he secretly hoped Lucius was turning over in his grave, knowing his four hundred year old whiskey was being enjoyed by Harry Potter on his 18th birthday. It was the thing he would begin his journal with. He had pondered the idea of the journal earlier in the cave and had decided it was a stroke of brilliance. After tonight, he wouldn't speak of Sara again unless he had to. He would only speak *to* her on it's pages.

Lost in thought in his chair at the foot of the table, Harry didn't notice the four elves who placed a lighted birthday cake in front of him until they were right there at his elbow. The cake crackled, popped, whizzed, and sparkled as 18 colorful candles spat tiny fireworks above the words *Happy Birthday, Professor Potter*. Harry smiled with delight.

The elves turned too slowly and stared at Dobby, seated and uncomfortable at Harry's left side. His ears began to flatten and Draco sneered at them. "Get along or you'll be sitting right next to him." They skittered away and Malfoy chuckled.

Dumbledore leaned in, a sparkle in his eye. "Make your wish, Harry."

I wish... He thought, *I wish Sara finds whatever she needs to make her happy*. He blew out the candles.

Draco had never seen anyone more thrilled with a piece of birthday cake than Harry and Dobby. He himself had never had a birthday cake of his own and the few he'd sampled tasted exactly like regular cake, but Potter grinned like it was caviar.

As soon as the plates were taken away, small glasses and a crystal bowl were set on the table as he'd requested and Draco brought a box of Cuban cigars from under the table. He put on an aristocratic drawl that Harry thought he could only have seen on *Masterpiece Theater*. "Cigar, anyone?"

"Cigars!" Hagrid bellowed at Draco's side. "I ain't had a good cigar in months! Are those really from *Havana*? At least I think that's what it says."

Malfoy looked at Hagrid like he was crazy. "*Where else* would they be from?"

"I've had a good one or two from America down at the pub."

"Who smokes *American* cigars? Really!"

Everyone except McGonagall and Dobby accepted one and Draco started pouring drinks. He splashed a bit in the bottom of a glass and smiled as he set it before Dobby. Dobby raised his eyes to Draco and smiled back.

Harry choked on the cigar and Malfoy laughed out loud. "Potter, haven't you ever smoked before?"

"No." Harry grimaced, a hand at his throat, "*Of course not*."

Malfoy shook his head as he expertly lit his cigar. "You don't *inhale*." He rolled his eyes, "*Gryffindors*."

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Harry rolled his eyes in return, his voice scratchy. "*Uppity rich kids*." He shook his head and puffed his cigar in imitation. In a splendid mood over his birthday cake, he had to take it a little further. It was so much fun to get Draco going. He put on his best *Masterpiece Theater*, held his cigar loftily and swilled the scotch in his tiny snifter. "Who would smoke an *American* cigar? *Reeeeeeally!* I only smoke cigars from *Ha-va-na* because I'm a *snob* and that's what *all* snobs do."

McGonagall tried to hide her amusement, but started twittering behind her hand. Dumbledore grinned and Hagrid laughed out loud unabashedly. Filch sneered at Harry from the other end of the table. "Oh shut-up, Potter. At least I know the difference. Being an uppity rich kid has it's advantages, you know. You're just jealous because you weren't born a Malfoy."

Harry nearly choked on his scotch and his chair landed hard on all fours. "Are you for real?" Harry laughed, "I thank my lucky stars every day of my life that I wasn't born a Malfoy. *Nothing* could be worse."

"Of course, you'd rather change your name to *Weasley*, then go around sniffing *flowers* and petting *bunnies*. Yet you wonder why I bought you Gospel music."

"I prefer *Potter*, actually. At least there's no scull and cross-bones on my family crest. Maybe you should change *your* name! *Severus* Malfoy would be a good name for you."

McGonagall laughed again, doing her best to keep it quiet. Dumbledore was shaking his head in disbelief. The two of them drove him nuts. He stood and raised his glass. "Let me interrupt the mudslinging contest, if you would." Slowly, everyone got to their feet. Dobby stood on his chair, nervously lifting his little sip of whiskey.

"To you, Harry, on this first day of your eighteenth year, we wish you all the best for many more to come."

"To Harry!" Hagrid bellowed. It echoed around the table as Malfoy smiled, but remained silent.

Dobby drank what was in his glass, turned white, and fell down in his chair, his eyes bulging and his ears standing on end. Harry laughed and patted his shoulder. He raised his glass in return. "Thank you." He smiled warmly, "All I want to know is; who's bringing the scotch next year?"

When everyone had finished their drinks, Harry and Draco moved to the roof of the tower. The night was clear, the sky full of stars and the moon almost full as it cast a silver sheen, driving the darkness into shadow. They climbed onto Harry's bed and sat cross-legged, examining the pocket knife Hagrid had given him until they fell into silence.

Harry didn't know how to approach the subject except to come right out and ask. "So, Malfoy, what did Dumbledore want to talk to you about?"

"The ambush." Draco told him as he poured them both fresh drinks. "He wanted to know why it was at *my* house. I think he believes I knowingly led you into a trap."

"Nonsense." Harry said as he accepted his glass, "He's not stupid, Draco. He means well. He knows something's up."

"I didn't tell him anything. I played ignorant."

"And let me guess, he saw right through you."

"I hate that look he always gives me. The over-the-glasses thing."

Harry smiled, having received that look many times himself. "Did you tell him about Voldemort's offer?"

"No! I told you, Potter. I don't want his help. I'll be fine."

"It's your call, Malfoy. Just don't be foolish out of *stubborn pride*."

"I said I know what I'm doing."

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Harry sighed and turned to look Draco in the eye. "If you ever change your mind, you know where to find me. Don't hesitate to ask."

"Thanks, Harry." He raised his glass, "Here's to living to see nineteen."

"I'll drink to that." He smiled. "Just make sure you find a way to do it."

Draco held Harry's eyes over his glass, wanting to say more, wanting to ask him for help, but something stopped him. His stubborn pride? His self-confidence? Maybe a little. But there was something else. Something that made him hold back. He sipped his drink and smiled, putting on his rich, drawling, heavy-lidded voice again. "*Cigahhr?*"

* * *

Harry awoke with a heavy head, a sour stomach, and an aching body. Snape had actually forced them to buy his hangover potion in Hogsmead and this he kept by the bed. He found it now and drank some down, then located his glasses and put them on. Malfoy was already up, his bed was made.

Harry went over and took the envelope off the coverlet. It was addressed to him. His shoulders slumped, already knowing what it would say. None of his things were about like they usually were.

The bottle of scotch was corked and sat on Draco's table beside the picture of him and Sara at the Yule Ball. This distressed Harry, that Malfoy would abandon this picture he claimed was his fondest memory, usually to Harry's irritation, but suddenly he wanted Draco to have it. In fact, he thought he *needed* to have it. He carried the letter and the frame to his bed, stopping to pull out Sara's letter, too. He'd read it quickly in the cave last night, but thought he'd let it sink in a little more, top off his mood.

Potter,

I suppose you should get used to this, waking up to find a note and someone gone. Seems to happen to you a lot. Sorry I didn't tell you I was leaving, but oh well. It must have slipped my mind in between glasses of whiskey. Besides, I know how you adore me and I didn't want to make you cry on your birthday.

I also know how you Gryffindors love to worry, so don't. I'm going to leave town for awhile, do some traveling. Thought I'd see a bit of the world before I'm pushing up daisies. By the way, you can use my pool and my daiquiri machine if you put some wards on my house. (That's right Potter, laugh it up.)

Who knows, maybe I'll send you a tee-shirt.

D.M.

PS: Miss me yet?

"You can't hide everything with jokes and sarcasm, Malfoy." Harry said aloud and sighed. He went to the desk and put the frame in a padded muggle mailer. He enclosed a little sticky note.

Malfoy,

You forgot your memory.

H.P.

He tied it to Hedwig's leg and she flew off at once. He returned to his bed and Sara's letter.

Harry,

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I can't believe how much has happened since it was your birthday last. It seems more like a lifetime than just a year. Only the good parts, the time I spent with you, was never long enough. I miss you! Every day the pain of your absence grows and it tears me in two. Half of me is desperate for home.

Half of me needs to follow through.

I spend all my time watching the locator, wondering what you're doing and who you're with. All it does is make things worse. All of my focus is on you, instead of on healing so I can get back to you. The worry and the anxiety is too much. Only you could know the agony I felt, cowering behind the couch the other night, because I think you felt it, too. It can't happen a second time, Harry. I could never find the strength to desert you yet again, not like that. It was torture for both of us and we're better off with nothing. For this reason, I won't be returning to the cottage and I put the locator in a safe place where it will have to stay.

Don't misunderstand. I want to see you more than anything, but when I do, I want it to be forever. I need to be able to stand beside you in the face of danger, not hide in your shadow. I want to be open and honest about the things that bother me. I want the black in my hair to go away.

I left Hogwarts knowing that contact would be counter-productive and I was right. Things just keep declining. I saw what happened to you last night. Most of it anyway. The Orb went dark just as the Death Eaters were closing in and I thought my heart had been ripped from my chest. Thinking the worst, I left the surrounding town in ruins.

There is only one person on Earth who can teach me this kind of control. I will see her soon. In the meantime, just remember that I love you completely.

Forever, Sara

Harry tucked the letter into the small box he kept in Sara's hiding place and took his birthday gift out to the roof, sitting down at the table with it. He had an hour or so before his lesson and desperately wanted to talk to Sara. The journal allowed him this outlet.

Dear Sara,

My birthday was great! The only thing missing was you. I see you tried your hand at gift wrapping and you did a splendid job. Don't think I didn't notice. This journal was a good idea and I'm sure it won't be neglected. It will likely be my salvation.

I just read the letter you left with it for the second time. I want you to know that I understand your reasons and don't blame you for staying away from the cottage. You have to focus on yourself and the things that plague you and, ultimately, our relationship. I agree that the night we crossed paths was pure agony and if not for Draco, I might have totally lost it.

I found a companion in Draco I never thought possible. He drove me nuts the whole time he was here and nearly got me killed more than once, but now that he's gone there's just one more thing that's missing. I feel completely and totally alone.

I fear for him, strangely enough. I always hoped he would go away and never return, for seven years I've thought that. Now that it's become reality, I have a bad feeling about it and something tells me the Draco who spent the past two weeks by my side will soon cease to exist. Voldemort has set his sights on Malfoy and if he thinks running will save him he's wrong. I can only hope he comes to his senses and returns to Hogwarts.

One thing I wanted to mention was that I spent last night drinking whiskey four centuries old, which once belonged to Lucius Malfoy. Draco gave it to me and we had a hell of a night on the roof, playing your music, smoking Lucius' Cuban cigars and shooting off the enchanted fireworks Fred and George sent me. I only wish I could tell you for real how it felt to drink Lucius' heirloom, especially with his son by my side. Can you imagine the look on his face? He would have a heart attack he'd be so furious and it made me smile. Wherever he is now, I hope he was watching.

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I have to meet Dumbledore for my wandless magic lesson, so I'll write more later tonight.

Love, Harry

Harry closed the book and grabbed his robe.

There were skills to be mastered.

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22. A Fall From Grace

Harry sat deep in thought, his eyes fixed on the silvery surface of the pensieve under its swirl of mist. He'd already added a good many thoughts over the weeks since he'd received it. Rotten birthdays and Christmases. Lousy summers. Aunt Marge. He took the night he accused Sara in his jealousy over Draco. The arguments they'd had over her secrets.

He wondered if it was right to pick and choose how to remember Sara. Maybe it was wrong to vividly recall only the good times and leave himself with only a vague memory of mistakes they had made. Painful as they were, they were *real*, as real as the happiness they had shared, but in the end the fact that it eased his torment, lightened the shadow over his heart, made the decision easier. Finally, he sat back, his anxiety lessened.

Harry pushed back his chair and dressed for bed. Climbing in, he heard her song on the wind, soft, distant, and beautiful. She sang every night now, the same song which he had never heard before and it stirred him as he lay his head on the pillow, gazing up at the stars, breathing the faint scent of her perfume, the words drifting bittersweet and haunting to his ears. He knew them by now and he silently sang along, not wanting to disturb her sad, angelic melody. The emotion of her voice saturated his senses and he felt her suffering, her love for him, her faith. He sighed as the breeze that spanned the distance between them faded away.

Harry turned onto his side and looked at the empty half of the bed where he never slept. Her pillow fluffed and untouched by his head, waiting for her to return. He thought of Sara, wondering what she would think if she could see the things he was accomplishing in his life. He told her everything in his journal, and it helped him vent his frustration, his unhappiness, but it wasn't the same. He longed to

send her a letter, but didn't think he could deal with it when it came back unopened. Besides, he didn't want to put Sara in the position of having to turn away his letters. It would only upset her and he wanted her to get well so she could come home.

Going back to work with Seamus had been good for him. Seeing all his friends again, especially Ron, who wasn't due to start his classes at the Wizard Defense League for two more days, the same morning Harry would teach his first class of the year and Hermione would begin schooling at the Ministry. She had made the decision to become an auror shortly after the ordeal at Draco's house and had even been promoted, mostly due to Dumbledore's constant arguing with the Minister, claiming Hermione was brilliant and that her talent was being wasted in a back room full of books. She was made assistant to the Head Auror and given a substantial raise, which Harry knew she and Ron needed.

Harry had been doing better than he knew, financially. After receiving a letter from Gringott's bank, telling him his vault was full, he went down there to straighten out the misunderstanding. His parents' gold still sat untouched on the table, but all around it was piled bags of money, almost up to his chest against the back wall. He was dazzled, but soon came to his senses and asked to see a record of the transactions, thinking it might be Sara and if so the money would be returned. As it turned out, Seamus had still been sending his half of all profits, even though he hadn't put in a single day's work in months and Seamus had set the new operation up himself. He'd gone straight to Ireland via the portkey later than evening, but somehow left agreeing to keep the money.

Right away Harry had written to Brad Silverman, asking him to get a contractor to come to the cottage and the digging had been underway for over three weeks. He stopped by daily, watching the hole in the ground progress and occasionally touching up this or that in the cave.

She still sent him things for the house and more personal gifts like fine robes from the different wizard shops of Europe, tons of clothes, and little odds and ends that reminded her of him. Not a word, though. There was never a note and everything came by rented owl. He wondered where she was and if things were improving. Two months was a long time and he was growing impatient for her return.

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More and more he found his thoughts turning to Draco, especially now that the deadline for Voldemort's offer was so close. Harry wasn't sure of the exact date, but knew it had to be soon and Malfoy's fate weighed on him. He wouldn't admit it, but he actually *missed* Draco. He'd kept Harry so preoccupied that he often forgot to be miserable and he thought he might have done as much for Draco, as well. They were both alone in the world, after all, their lives left in shambles.

Harry filled the void by keeping himself busy. He had received help from Remus Lupin on his lesson plan and was all set for classes to start. He had learned tremendously from Dumbledore over the summer, especially after Draco left and Harry was bored much of the time. They would spend 6 or 7 hours together during the day, venturing into the Forbidden Forest, out onto the lake, or even into the mountains for lessons. Working with Seamus, the digging of the cellar, planning his classes and shopping for his office rounded out his schedule and there was barely time for anything else.

He had begun stockpiling his one case a week allotment of Finnegan's Swill at the cottage and kept only a few bottles around the tower. He'd even given some away to the teachers. He was too busy to bother with drinking anymore and to tell the truth, he really didn't miss it and had moved Snape's potion from the bedside table to a cabinet in the bathroom. He'd gone out in London a few times, most recently with 12 of his classmates, but he found himself only having a few. His mind would wander to Sara, and often to Malfoy, and he didn't think he was all that much fun. He missed Sara more with each passing day and it felt wrong to have a good time. His heart just wasn't in it.

* * *

After a quick morning shower, Harry carried his most recent purchases down to his office and smiled as he looked around. There were lots of books, gadgets, charts, maps, and magical thingamajigs. Sara had sent him a talking mirror, a coat rack made of brass, ivory and jade for his cloak and a matching umbrella stand. Madam Sprout had given him a giant snapdragon that was always trying to bite him, and there were pictures everywhere. Most of them Quidditch shots and one of himself and Dumbledore with the Elders of the Order of Merlin purchased from Colin Creevey, who would be returning as a seventh year student. On one side of the window was the animated *Wronski Feint* from Fred and George and he grinned as Malfoy plowed into the ground again and again.

From the box he took a grade book, more quills and ink. Lots of paper. A few more reference books. A small picture of Sara to sit on the corner of his desk. A *Star-Trek* mug from the mall and all the makings for tea. He caught his reflection in the mirror Sara had sent him and recalled Dumbledore suggesting he visit the barber while in London. His hair was past his ears and starting to curl out a little, he was constantly brushing it out of his eyes, but it felt right for him to not look his best. He didn't feel his best.

Lastly, he placed the Confidall in a little brass stand he'd had made for it and set it next to her picture. The office was perfect, he decided, though it was lacking something that Harry couldn't quite put his finger on. The snapdragon sneezed and startled him and he laughed out loud. "I think you're allergic to me." He told it. In response it turned its large purple bloom to the window. "Snubbed by a flower." He shook his head and got to his feet. Dumbledore would be finished with his breakfast soon and Harry hated to make the man wait.

On the way to the library, Harry wondered about Snape. He had been gone for over a month now, to no one knows where, but the Headmaster said he had sent word that he would be back in time for classes. That meant he would probably be arriving today. Harry dreaded his return and the animosity

that came with it. Deciding to hold his anger in check and not let Snape get to him, he pushed open the door and smiled at Dumbledore.

A tall, muscular man in his mid to late thirties stood beside him. His brown hair curled past his shoulders and a thin scar tore across his right cheek. He was broad-chested and wearing a light cloak. A sword of intimidating length sat on his hip. "Harry," said Dumbledore, "This is Roland. He will be your fencing instructor."

"Fencing?!" Harry grinned, "Cool!" He shook the man's hand and stood back, already liking Roland for his confident manner and pleasant smile. "It's nice to meet you, sir."

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Roland was a little frightening. He was stealthy and lightning quick as they'd run through a little demonstration. He also used the colossal sword he carried for this and Harry had a basic sword Roland said was good for learning. Harry had tried to see what was coming and did surprisingly well, but Roland's skill quickly had him cornered. After that, it was just beginners stuff. Stances and arc. Balance.

Roland was from a small wizarding village in the Scottish Highlands. He was handsome, even with slash across his face and friendly in a gruff sort of way. He was patient, which Harry was thankful for, and good with words. His instruction was easy to follow.

Harry had never seen this room before. it was very large, utterly empty except for a long table, shoved up against the wall, and two dusty old chairs. There were no windows and six pillars lined the middle in pairs. On the table sat water and two glasses. The floor was marble tile, set in alternating squares of color that glowed in the light of the fires high above their heads. Harry got the idea that fencing lessons were not regularly offered at Hogwarts and this room had been simply the best choice. He loved it, liked how vast and empty it was and decided to replicate it in the house, if it ever got built, that is. Just smaller and with windows.

Harry left Roland just before lunch, ate quickly, then joined Dumbledore for another stroll into the forest.

* * *

The start of year feast was great. Harry felt important sitting at the head table, but hated the constant glances and the whispering. After it was finally over and he's explained himself to at least thirty of the older Gryffindors, Harry was mentally exhausted and dragged his feet back to Sara's tower for a hot shower and his most comfortable pajamas.

Already looking forward to his next fencing lesson with Roland, Harry climbed into bed, excited and more than a bit nervous about classes in the morning. He had all his clothes hung in Sara's dressing room, which still contained a lot of her things, and now his as well, since he had to relinquish his room in Gryffindor Tower.

It saddened him that he would no longer know the password. That he couldn't lounge around the common room or study by the fire with Hermione and Ron. He missed his friends. Missed Neville and Seamus, though he saw them every night at what Seamus called "The Swill Factory". It wasn't the same.

At start of term he couldn't wait to graduate so he could be on his own. At that time, he'd had no idea how lonely 'on your own' could be. He missed Sara. The very thought of her caused physical pain. An ache in his chest that could not be ignored. He wished she was here so he could tell her how nervous he was about teaching and she would tell him how he would do just fine. Somehow, when such words came from Sara they had an impact that no one else could manage. He always found his doubts melting away in the warmth of her smile. Without her reassurance, without her arms around him, he was just cold and alone. And nervous.

It was with this thought that he drifted off to sleep.

"Wake up, Potter."

Harry felt a slight tugging on his sleeve and became quickly aware that someone was on the bed, looking down at him. His eyes flew open, his hand bringing the Egyptian dagger from its sheath and to a defensive position before he was truly awake. He blinked once and there was Malfoy, kneeling beside him. Harry lowered the weapon, ready with a clever line, but his words faltered when he looked a little closer. Draco was sniffing a little. His eyes were red-rimmed, his pale skin blotchy. His eyes were dry, but Harry knew something terrible had happened. He sat up, trying to think of something to say.

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"You were right, Potter." He said with a hushed, shaky voice. "I should have listened to you."

"I thought you were leaving. What happened?" Harry ventured, apprehensive, dreading what Draco was going to say.

"Ha! That's a laugh." he said with no enthusiasm. "I didn't make it very far. I got to the train station, but never made it aboard. I should have known better. I've never considered myself to be a stupid person, Potter, but I played right into their hands."

"They were expecting you to attempt an escape."

"Of course they were."

"What did they do? I mean, after they caught you?"

Draco's breath hitched as he pulled up his sleeve, revealing the Dark Mark, etched black into the porcelain skin of his forearm, the skull standing out in stark contrast under the silver light of the moon.

"If someday you have to kill me, Harry, I want you to know that I understand. In fact, I wouldn't mind if you did it right now. This is worse than death could ever be." He lowered his sleeve.

"I'm not going to kill you, Malfoy. Let's just get Dumbledore and figure out what to do. You don't have to live this life, you know. Snape has this very mark."

"There's nothing to be done. Don't bother getting anybody."

"That's your answer to this whole thing? *Just go with it?*"

"This was the life that was chosen for me, Potter. It's about time I accepted the fact. I would rather live the Slytherin way than in the shadow of fear. I could never hide in the safe haven of Hogwarts like Snape does. I'll never get away from Voldemort."

"Stay here with *me* then. I can protect you, Draco. I swear nothing will happen to you."

Draco held Harry's eyes for a long moment, knowing Harry meant what he said. Harry could certainly protect him and he was torn, wanting salvation, knowing he couldn't accept it.

"Malfoy, don't do this. Don't leave."

"You know I have to."

Harry hung his head, desperate for a way to convince him. He knew there was none. Harry knew Draco had come to say goodbye.

"Potter I want you to keep this for me."

He handed Harry a clam shaped gold box, which he opened carefully, only to find the same silvery liquid mist as was in his pensieve.

"It only holds one memory. One that I don't want tarnished by my life to come."

"What is it?"

"My most treasured moment. You can look if you want. Just don't let anything happen to it."

"Why not put it in your bank vault or lock it away in your mansion? There must be a thousand places you could hide this there."

"Something told me it was best left with you."

Harry closed the clam's lid and set it carefully on the bedside table. "You're making a mistake, Malfoy. You said you should have listened to me. Well learn from the past and listen to me now. Stay here. Like I said, I can protect you. No one needs to know what's on your arm."

"I've made my decision."

"If you ever want out, I'll help you. Remember that as long as you can."

"I'll remember."

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"Just promise me one thing. Tell me you won't let them hurt Sara."

"I stand by what I said. I'll never hand her over. No matter what it costs me."

Harry tried to smile but couldn't. He felt like someone died. "I'll keep your memory safe. I only hope someday you'll want it back."

"Maybe when I'm as old as Dumbledore and McGonagall put together. No, *older*." Draco grinned.

Harry leapt out of bed, unable to accept this course of action and his voice thundered with anger.

"What are you *thinking*? Malfoy! This isn't a game!" Draco climbed to his feet and Harry came around the bed to look him in the eye. "This is your *life* we're talking about! It's not a few days with your father's friends!"

"I *know* what it is! Do you really think I don't know *exactly* what this is about?" He touched his forearm. "I'm only too familiar, in case you forgot."

Harry grabbed Malfoy and dragged him toward the doors to Sara's rooms. "Come on. We're not having this conversation out here."

"Just let me go!"

"No." Harry said, pulling Draco into what was once the bedroom and slammed all four doors shut with a wave of his hand. "I can't *just let you go*! What am I supposed to say? Oh, *Deatheater*? Sounds good to me, have fun, send a postcard?"

"I'd have to send it from Hell. It'll be tough to get an owl."

Harry yelled his words, his hands clenched, frustrated and despairing over Draco's lack of reason.

"Can you stop making jokes for *one minute*? This is serious!"

Draco raised his voice in response. "What do you want me to say, *Potter*? Do you really think this is what I wanted for myself? It's not. But there's *no way out* for me. I'm not Severus Snape, Harry. I'm the son of *Lucius Malfoy*. There's nowhere to hide!"

"This *isn't* final! I won't let it be!"

"And why do *you* care so much? You've always hated me anyway. I'm not so fond of you either."

"Then what are you doing here? Really, Malfoy, let's dispense with the childish notions. You're still a creep, but you're no Deatheater. You're not your father and you're no one's pawn. You've been your father's possession all your life and you're content to be Voldemort's as well? Isn't it time you claimed your independence?"

"Shut-up, Potter." Draco shifted his eyes to the floor and turned away. "You're worse than Sara, you know. It's rather nauseating, the way you can convince me. But the truth of it is, if I stay with you, I'll probably get you killed. If I leave, at least I have the hope that one day soon you'll do what Dumbledore is training you to do. I'll have to extend my quota for Harry Potter rescues, of course."

He laughed and Harry found it disturbing. "Kill Voldemort and the Mark will cease to exist."

"I'm *good*, but I'm not *Superman*! You can't be serious? You're putting your hope in the fact that little old me can conquer the Dark Lord just like that? I'd hate to disappoint you, but saving the world isn't currently on my list of abilities."

Draco smiled, his voice strained and quiet. "Why don't you just start with England?" Harry's shoulders slumped with a sympathetic sigh. Draco Malfoy, the boy with no feelings, was trying not to

cry. Draco's hand unconsciously rubbed the site of the Dark Mark and he turned away.

"Say I do kill Voldemort. What would you do?"

"Escape. Wander the world. Get as far away from here as I can. If there's one thing Sara did that makes sense, it was run away. Don't hold it against her, Harry. Sometimes leaving is the only thing that makes sense."

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Harry went to the table at the end of the sofa and poured them both a drink. He laid a hand on Draco's shoulder and handed him his when he turned.

Draco considered his glass, then raised it with a shaky hand. "To us, Potter. To what we were, to what we will become." He touched his glass to Harry's without waiting for a response, and took a considerable drink.

Harry stood crestfallen, finally sipping his. As he considered Malfoy's words he remembered the innocence of their school days, even missed the rivalry they'd shared for so many years. He fell onto the sofa and set his glass aside. "You don't have to do this." He sighed, "Stay a few days at least."

"I wish I could."

"Stay one day. At least give me that much time to convince you not to ruin your life."

Draco finished off his drink and set the glass on the stand. "I have to go now." Before Harry could stop him, he was through the doors and on the roof, collecting his Lightning Mach 1 from beside the bed.

Harry leapt to his feet and hurried after him. "Why won't you listen! Just stop this right now! Get ahold of yourself, think about what you're doing!"

"Why?" Draco spoke calmly, "What's left for me anyway? I have no real friends. The only one I ever had is gone. Besides, she's in love with someone else." His eyes clouded with pain and sorrow at the thought of Sara. "Thanks for putting up with me this summer, Potter."

Harry tried again to smile, but he was too upset to manage it. Malfoy looked back at him, his eyes like a broken child. His confidence gone, his ever present arrogance snuffed out. Harry wanted desperately to hug him, but found he couldn't.

Draco shook Harry's hand, said good bye, and was gone into the night with a flash of his broom.

Harry hung his head as he put the little pensieve containing Malfoy's most beloved memory in a safe place and laid back down, though sleep would not find him for many dark and troubled hours.

* * *

Harry sat in his office, utterly dejected, wondering if there was anything he could do. Malfoy's refusal of help brought him great anguish and he couldn't focus on the breakfast an elf had brought in, or the class he was about to teach. His heart just wasn't in it this morning.

He left the office, traversed the empty classroom, and made his way to the dungeon via Sara's secret passage. He found Snape in his office, perusing some notes for the day ahead and sipping a cup of tea. He was tan, his hair had sun streaks and his happy mood was apparent. Wondering where Snape had been all summer, Harry tapped on the door frame.

"Yes, Potter? Need my *expertise* already?"

Harry stepped inside and fell into one of the chairs across the desk. "It's Malfoy."

"What about Draco? He's well I hope?"

"Not exactly. He's, well, in a very bad way."

Snape's demeanor changed instantly. His mouth fell open, his hands dropped to the desk and slowly, he rose from his seat. His voice was concerned and a little shaky when he finally spoke. "*What happened?*"

Harry conveyed the story, glad to finally tell someone, slumped in his seat.

"It can't be." Snape fell back into his chair. "Draco no longer belongs among them."

"I agree." Harry sighed. "I swore to protect him. I begged him to stay at Hogwarts, but he refused. He said there was nowhere for him to hide."

"He wasn't lying, Potter. Voldemort would never allow Lucius' son to deny him."

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"But *you* got away and lived to tell about it!" Harry insisted.

"Draco is a different matter."

"I don't know what to do about it."

"There's only one thing you *can* do, and it's beyond your capability. Mine as well. I shall have to inform the Headmaster." Snape said, staring at the surface of his desk.

"I'll tell him. I spoke to Draco, I'll be better able to answer his questions." Harry stood, "I just thought you should know. He was your student."

"Thanks, Potter." Snape said, "And good luck today. If you run into trouble, I'm sure I could easily bail you out."

"Actually, there *is* something you can do for me. After last night, I don't feel like facing a class half full of Slytherins. In fact, I don't feel like doing much of anything at all, except going back to bed for a week or so. D'you have any pepper-up potion?"

Grateful, Harry headed back to his classroom, his spirits temporarily lifted. He was glad Snape decided to take pity on him, even if the enthusiasm he felt was false. He'd only taken a small amount, so Snape had even provided him with a bit in a vial for later, in case his disposition sank before the end of classes. Harry had a feeling he would be needing it.

* * *

Harry faced the first class of the day. Slytherins and Ravenclaws. Third years. They were all staring at

him, waiting as he tried to think of something to say. He was nervous, and distracted by Malfoy's plight, even with the pepper-up potion. He was unfocused and beginning to think he was looking quite foolish. "Ughh... hello." He said. "Good morning."

"Good morning, Professor." A lone girl from Ravenclaw answered, smiling with dreamy eyes. She sighed when he looked at her.

Harry smiled. "*That's* going to take some getting used to. Professor is a word I'm accustomed to saying, not hearing."

A few Ravenclaws laughed, but the Slytherins were beginning to give him looks. He was determined to be a good teacher, but his nerves just would not subside.

Suddenly, Hedwig flew in through the open window, bearing a note on lavender paper. He hadn't seen Hedwig for days. Now he knew why. She dropped the letter, circled and came to rest on Harry's shoulder. He unfolded the paper, the amoridon Sara had given him radiating warmth against his skin.

Good luck today, Professor.

Don't worry, you'll be fine. I promise.

Love Always,

Sara

Harry smiled, feeling reassured and re-folded the note.

"Letter from your girlfriend?" A Slytherin sneered. The others laughed.

Harry refrained from docking them 5 points. "As a matter of fact, yes."

The girl who'd bid him good morning narrowed her eyes at the letter.

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Harry tucked it in the pocket of his favorite black robe, the very one he and Ron had picked out on their weekend trip to Diagon Alley more than a year before. Feeling just a little more confident, Harry smiled at the class. "Let's get started, shall we?"

* * *

By the time his last class rolled around, Harry was mentally exhausted and beginning to feel strained under the influence of the potion. He hated pepper-up, thought it made him unnatural and couldn't wait until he could feel like himself again.

The last two-hour class was seventh years, Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs, thankfully. Ginny was in this class, as well as Colin Creevey, who promptly took his picture. Ginny just smiled and took her seat. Harry had held his breath, thinking she looked great, better than usual, and wondering if she would come up and talk to him. He was glad when she didn't. To this class alone, he insisted they call him Harry. They were mostly his friends, after all, many of them having visited the tower on any given Friday night last year. He wasn't comfortable and wished Sara would send another note.

Unfortunately, there was no sign of Topenga.

After class, Harry retired to his office to get some things ready for the morning and he had to water the snapdragon. It had just bitten him for the third time when Ginny walked in. She giggled as Harry battled the flower, who had a mouthful of Harry's hair and wouldn't let go, cursing and threatening it with a new home in the dungeons. Wrapping his hands around its stem, he tried to strangle it. It slapped him with an oversized leaf and knocked him to the floor.

"Let me try." She offered and took the water from Harry's hands. "Hello there, *beautiful* flower." She said, stroking its petals and Harry swore it smiled at her. She dumped the water over the soil and told the snapdragon to be nice to Harry.

"What's this?" Harry smiled from the floor, "It likes *girls*?"

"It likes a soft touch, Harry. Try being a little nicer to it."

"Nicer! It *hates* me!"

Ginny laughed again. "Get up before you ruin your robe."

Harry climbed to his feet, looking slightly embarrassed. He took the Confidall from his pocket and placed it back in its little stand next to Sara's picture and sat down behind his desk. Ginny leaned against its side, her books in one arm.

"So," he asked her, "how was your summer?"

"Great!" She smiled, "I spent most of it with Hermione and Ron. I tried to stay with Fred and George, but they had their girlfriends over every night and they're *annoying*. I assure you. Poor Mum and Dad have no one left at home and they're going stir crazy." Ginny said and considered him for a moment, then giggled.

"What?"

"Your hair." She smiled, leaning in to smooth it for him, sticking up where the snapdragon had bitten it. Harry sneezed and Ginny brought her hand away, examining it in amusement. "It's full of pollen." Harry laughed and caught her eyes, her face framed by pretty red hair. "I'm going to *pick* that flower one day. It's a menace, Ginny, I swear that plant has it out for me."

She smoothed his hair again, as it had stood back up, running her fingers through it. It stood back up again. "You're going to have to wash it out. It won't stay." She said and glanced at his eyes, bright green behind his glasses. He was looking back at her and there was something different in his countenance as her fingers brushed through his hair. Something she had only seen a few times before. Suddenly, he looked away. Ginny pulled back her hand and stood, feeling suddenly anxious. "It's good to see you, Harry. I have to go now. You did great today." She quickly smiled at the paperweight she'd given him for his birthday, right out on the desk where he had only a few things.

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"See you at dinner." He managed and watched her hurry from the room, seemingly as taken off guard as he was. He had no idea what had just happened. They were laughing and joking around, and then

she was touching his hair and he looked at her...

Harry sighed, his eyes falling on the picture of Sara he kept on his desk. "I hope you didn't see that." He whispered and the snapdragon sneezed a cloud of pollen in his direction. "Keep it up!" He told it, his attention temporarily diverted, "You'll find yourself living in the *closet* before long." He stood as the snapdragon turned it's back and took to looking out the window, if that was possible. "I hope you're not too fond of the *sun*." He threatened. The flower ignored him.

* * *

Time was uneventful at Hogwarts. One day was no different than the next. Classes went smoothly for Harry, except for the Slytherins, who were the only house to lose points by him. He had been accepted wholeheartedly as a teacher by the seventh-years, which was a load off his mind, but Malfoy and Sara kept him from finding happiness. Everywhere he looked was a reminder of one or the other. As the nights grew colder, Harry piled blankets and warming charms on the bed, but finally had to move it off the roof. Even the weather repellent bubble wasn't enough to keep him from freezing when he climbed out in the morning, especially when the snow began to fall.

The ceiling, or what would be the ground level's floor was receiving it's finishing touches by the end of October, just in time for winter, which Harry had insisted on. It would do him no good to have a big hole in the ground, full of snow and ice. He wanted to get to work connecting the cellar to the cave and the other things he had planned, like hidden tunnels and secret rooms, the doors of which would be protected by passwords and blended perfectly into the walls. With the size of the rock shelf the house was on, he could build an underground mansion if he wanted, but thought he'd start small. After all, how much space did two people need?

Harry pondered this as he prepared for his one-hour lesson with Roland, which he anticipated every night. He liked Roland, loved his stories of wandering the Highlands with his sword, of creatures he had battled, and of an attack of three giants on his village when he was Harry's age. And he learned quickly. Harry was able to hold him off for several minutes now before he lost his concentration and found himself staring at the point of Roland's great sword. It was his time with Roland that he looked forward to, even more so than his half hour visits to the cottage and his two hours a night with Seamus at the Swill Factory. He barely had time to grade his student's papers and found himself using Dobby for this quite often. Luckily, Dobby was thrilled to be asked and Harry paid him a three sickles a week for his assistance.

Harry had not heard from Sara again after the note she'd sent the first day of classes, though her unmarked packages still arrived at the tower every few days without fail.

He didn't hear from Malfoy until mid-November. It was meant to make him laugh, he was sure, but Harry found no humor in it, only despair. He couldn't do what Malfoy expected him to do.

It was a postcard, the photo on the front depicting flames and Malfoy himself looking smug and holding a giant red pitchfork. *Greetings from Hell* it said. Harry turned it over and read the brief note. *It's rather hot here, but I'm managing. Being evil isn't all it's cracked up to be and no one appreciates my sense of humor. The host is a little inhospitable, but we share the same taste in black clothing. If I had my daiquiri machine it would be perfect. D.*

"A postcard from Hell." Harry said aloud, "Only you, Malfoy. Only you."

* * *

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Harry didn't hear from Draco again after that, and the unmarked packages began to come fewer and farther between. Construction had come to a halt for the winter and before he knew it, the decorations at Hogwarts had changed over to Christmas. The Yule Ball was rapidly approaching and Harry was put in charge of the committee Sara had headed last year. He was given the chore to keep his mind occupied, but it only made him think of her more.

He commissioned Ginny to assist in everything, as it really wasn't his forte, and she kept things running smoothly. They held the meetings in his classroom, not in the tower, but Sara's ghost was still there. He was reminded of her every time he gave his opinion on one of the house corners, when asked if he liked a certain song from Sara's music collection, whenever Ginny smiled at him from across the room.

It made him feel guilty that they had grown close again, the way they once were over long summers at the Burrow and Harry wondered if he should try to avoid Ginny a little. She wasn't doe-eyed with him the way she'd been before, she was a friend, and he welcomed a little female companionship, especially because it was perfectly innocent.

After this, the last meeting of the decorating committee and a little celebration as well, the students trickled out until only he and Ginny were left. As she cleared up and he stowed his few lists and ledgers, Harry broke the silence. "Thanks, Ginny. I don't know what I would have done without you." "Don't think about it, Harry. I had a great time and I think the Ball could be even better than last year."

"*Anything* would be better than last year." Harry said and immediately regretted his words.

Ginny looked at him, stung. "Is that so?"

"I didn't mean it like that. It's just, well, Sara spent the evening dancing with Malfoy and I woke up in the hospital with Dumbledore sitting there. It wasn't the best of times." He said, then remembered gathering around the table with Sara and all their friends and, in a way, kissing Ginny. "But then again it was."

"I agree." She said and smiled a little. "What was your favorite part?"

Harry knew he should either lie or get out of answering, but the look in her eyes prompted him to be

harsh and truthful. "Watching Sara sing."

"I see." She said and gathered her things into her bag. "She was very good."

Harry thought Ginny looked like she'd been slapped in the face and realized she figuratively *had* been.

"I'm sorry." He said, "Nothing is coming out right."

She said nothing, just looked at him, her expression hurt, her bag clutched to her chest.

"Come on," Harry said with apologetic eyes, "I'll walk you back to Gryffindor before I say something else."

Harry was quiet as he escorted Ginny and quick to leave her at the portrait hole. She was somber, upset by his words earlier and smiled only a little when he said he would look forward to seeing her at the Ball, which was the following night. She looked almost expectant as he prepared to go on his way, which only sped his departure.

Back at the tower, Harry poured himself a glass of Swill for the first time since summer, took a quick swallow, and set it aside. He wrote a letter to Sirius, then opened his journal.

Dear Sara,

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It's so depressing to be alone during the holidays. All I can think about is last year. Here I am, thinking of nothing but you and not really anticipating the Yule Ball tomorrow night. I don't know how I'll get through it, standing around by myself, watching other people dance, remembering your performance and missing all our friends. Maybe I'll get out one of our flasks. Then again, maybe not. It seems like such a cop-out.

I have to wonder what you're doing for Christmas? I have figured out that Mr. Sanders is with you and I can't tell you how happy I am that you aren't totally alone, but I have a feeling you're just as lonely as me. Surrounded by people, but solitary in our world of misery, a place no one else could ever know...

I can't go on like this. I know I said I would wait forever, but I had no idea how hard it would be. I never thought you would be gone for nearly six months. I am determined to be waiting for you when you finally decide to come home, but I feel myself wanting to give up, go looking for you, or send you a howler. At least if I do that, you won't be able to turn it away. Only I can't bring myself to be cruel to you.

I want you to finish what you're doing, whatever that is, but I wish you would send word once in awhile. A letter. A note even, just to tell me I'm still on your mind. A scrap of paper with one of your hearts on it would bring me a week's peace at least. I can't stand not hearing from you. The lack of communication is the my biggest source of doubt. The warmth of your Amidon is reassuring, but never enough.

I don't mean to be angry, but sometimes I am. I'm angry that you left me, that you stopped going to the cottage. I'm angry every time one of your packages come in the mail with no letter. I tear it open not to see what's in it, but to see if you've written. I'm angry that you didn't tell me about Lucius, that you didn't trust me to protect you. Most of all, that you didn't take me with you. Of course, I know why you left, why you kept your secrets, why you distance yourself from me. I understand completely, but that doesn't mean I have to like it or even accept it.

Happy Christmas, Sara.

Love, Harry

For reasons unknown to him, Harry's eyes fell on the joyous Criterion picture. He took it down off the wall and put it in the closet. He thought he might understand why Draco had turned all the pictures face down, at least a little. Being angry at one you loved so much hurt more than anything and the feeling of betrayal that came with it could drag all other emotions down until there was nothing left but the ire. Removing her image was the only statement that felt sort-of justified. Painful vindication for a broken heart.

* * *

Harry held his breath as he entered the Great Hall, already packed with students, the corners alive with magical scenes, soft music at conversation volume. The random floating mistletoe that Sara had invented zipped above the sea of heads and the students glittered in their finery. The older boys mostly in ornamental vests, capes tied *the right way*, the girls in pretty satin or velvet dresses, shimmering capes tossed back over their shoulders, so reminiscent of Sara. The younger students were attired as he was, in formal dress robes. His were black with a fine gold design and worn over a scarlet sweater and black pants with a pair of Italy's finer shoes. All of this was sent by Sara just last week.

It was still early in the evening. The dancing had not yet commenced and most were eating or socializing with friends over a glass of eggnog. He saw no sign of Ginny, but was glad in a way. He wanted to speak to Roland, who was talking with Dumbledore near the bottom of the steps.

"Hello, Professor. Hi Roland." He said as he entered their midst, "I hope the party is to your liking, sir."

"Splendid job Harry! You and your team are commendable." Dumbledore nodded appreciatively.

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"Thanks. But Ginny did most of the work."

"Talking about me, are you, Harry?"

Harry spun around and there she was, her striking red hair all done up and sparkling with glitter and pretty pieces of colored glass, cut to look like gems, sparkling here and there. She was dressed in black with a matching cape with gold trim. "Wow!" Harry said, genuinely surprised, "You look great!"

"So do you." She smiled "Who is your friend? Hello, Professor."

Dumbledore smiled over his glasses. "Good evening, Miss Weasley."

"This is Roland. My fencing instructor. Roland, this is Ginny Weasley."

Roland shook her hand. "It's nice to meet you, dear. Harry's told me all about you and your brother, Ron."

"Ron and Harry have been best friends since their first day at Hogwarts." Ginny smiled, "He's a regular member of the family."

"I see." Roland smiled back. The lights went low and the music started, as if on cue. "Would you do me the honor, Miss Weasley?" he offered his arm, "I haven't danced with a redhead in years."

She laughed and took his arm. "Nor I with a swordsman...well, actually I've *never* danced with a swordsman." She glanced over her shoulder, "Don't go far, Harry!"

To Harry's dismay, Snape appeared at his elbow. "New girlfriend, *Potter*?"

"*Old friend*, actually."

"Must be *difficult* for a young man such as yourself to be *all alone* and have an attractive young friend like Miss Weasley. Especially when she's quite enamored of you."

"*Severus*?" Dumbledore warned.

Harry glared at Snape. "One could say the same about *you* if you want to go speculating. A friend is just that, *Snape*."

"*Harry*?"

"What *exactly* are you trying to say, Potter? Do I hear a *lack of trust* in you're voice? Or was that just *the wind*?"

"I'm saying Ginny Weasley is a friend. At least *she* doesn't resemble an *old ghost*."

Snape narrowed his eyes and turned to face Harry fully. "If you have an accusation to make, then let's out with it. Otherwise, you'd be doing yourself a favor by mingling on the *other side of the room*."

Harry looked at him calmly, his hands clasped casually before him. "If you don't mind, the Headmaster and I were having a discussion."

Dumbledore was amused by this, but showed no partisanship. He just stood there and waited to see what happened next.

Harry and Snape locked eyes for a moment, exchanging hateful glances. Finally, Snape sneered and excused himself to the punchbowls.

* * *

With the lights low and the mood festive, Harry stood alone, leaning against a pillar in the dimness of the edge of the room, watching the celebration as if removed from it, a phantom of his 17 year old self. Most of the night, he had been living the year before, stuck in the rut of memory and wondering if things would have turned out differently had he never danced with Ginny at the last Yule Ball. Sara wouldn't have interrupted, Ginny wouldn't have run off, and he would have never gone to check on her, leaving Sara to occupy herself with Malfoy. It seemed everything that followed hinged on that one night.

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Tonight he had danced with Ginny three times and thought anything more would be inappropriate. Ginny didn't stare at him dreamily the way she once did, she was rather demure, but confident to a point. Like one who still feels, but has accepted disappointment and decided to move on, but keep themselves open to the possibility of a change of heart. He kept a modest distance and a proper dancing stance, quite unlike the way he danced with Sara, close and with feeling, like a rhythmic embrace, her head on his shoulder or resting against his cheek.

Harry watched the dancers, who moved apart and formed into larger groups as an upbeat Christmas song came on. One by U2 that he didn't remember being on the carefully crafted play list. The lyrics grabbed his attention, being eerily like his own thoughts and Harry listened closer, sinking down into the depths of depression.

*They're singing Deck the Halls, but it's not like Christmas at all,
I remember when you were here, and all the fun we had last year.*

He frowned, looking toward the stereo. There stood Snape, a CD case in his hand. He smirked and waved the thin plastic box at Harry. Was this revenge for their earlier conversation? Harry assumed so, but the song had already done it's damage and he turned away, hurrying out of the hall. He went straight to the tower, as fast as he could without running. His broom was still leaning against the wall at the base of the stairs and straight up he went. Inside the tower he found the nearest bottle of Swill and his glass from last night, still on the desk.

"*Inflamare*" He said and fell onto the new couch before the fire, ignited without so much as a wave of his hand. He summoned the Muggle Music Player, looking through it for the Christmas square he'd bought through owl order and instructed it to play on repeat. He turned it down low and set it on the coffee table.

Sara's absence weighed on his mind, more than it had all night while he listened to this song, and he drank his glass empty just as it was restarting for a second time. He felt wetness on his face and realized he was crying again, something he had never really done before Sara left him, not even when Cedric died. He wiped at his eyes, but finally gave up.

"Harry?" Came a voice from a few feet away, over his shoulder.

Harry quickly stood, slammed the lid of the player and walked to the doors to the roof, wiping at his eyes again, his back to her. "I can't talk right now, Ginny."

He cringed when her hand touched his shoulder. He didn't want anyone to see him this way, least of all Ginny.

"Harry," She whispered, "It's okay to be upset. I would be, too."

She slipped around and hugged him. Harry wrapped his arms around her and pressed his head against her hair. "Sometimes I hate her for this misery." He whispered, "But it's only because I love her so much." Harry lingered with his arms around her, perhaps too long.

Slowly she pulled away and wiped the tears from his face, a sympathetic smile softening her features. She kissed his cheek. "I'm sorry things worked out the way they did, Harry. I can only imagine how painful tonight must have been for you."

He cast his eyes to the floor and stepped away, picking up his glass and taking a sip. Ginny soon joined him.

"Can I taste that?" She asked curiously, "Finnegan's Swill?"

Harry sniffled and smiled a little. "Ron will kill me, but sure." He handed her the glass and her eyes went wide. "It burns!" She announced, "It's *awful*. Here, you can have it back."

Harry smiled as he retrieved the drink. He returned it to the table, then looked at her awkwardly.

"Thanks, Gin."

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"I'm glad I could be here for you. Anytime you need a friend, Harry."

"I'll remember that."

She stepped closer and spoke hesitantly and with a softer tone. "Maybe it's time you put it behind you.

You can't go on this way forever."

"I've been feeling that way lately, but I made a promise. One I desperately need to keep."

"So keep it. But live for *yourself* in the meantime." She sighed. "Harry, I'm so worried about you."

"I'll be alright, Ginny. Really, I'm not like this all the time."

"I hope not. But what about the holidays? I think staying here is a bad idea. Come home with me tomorrow. Come to the Burrow for Christmas."

"I'll be fine. Don't worry about me."

"I'll *always* worry about you." She caught his eyes and smiled her sincerity.

Harry kissed her cheek and drew her into a hug. "You're the best, Gin. No matter what Ron says about you."

She pulled back, her hands lingering on his arms, his on her waist. She'd meant to laugh, but looking at him now, something strange happened and she felt herself moving toward him, her eyes falling closed as the kiss enveloped her quickly. Harry's arms wrapping around her back, slipping against the satin of her dress. Suddenly, it was over and he pulled away. She was dismayed at his pained and confused expression.

"I...I'm sorry. I can't do this." He said and rushed out of the room, leaving her standing there, caught in a ruptured moment.

* * *

Harry stood on the roof in his pajamas, listening to the sounds of the departing train, thinking last night was all his fault. Something in her eyes had ignited a long lost feeling inside him, an emotion that only seemed to truly show itself on the night of the Yule Ball. He couldn't face Ginny and worse, he didn't want to. He was troubled to find he never wanted to see her again.

As the train moved into the distance, Harry found his seat in front of the player and flipped open the lid. His hand found his drink from last night and he took to sipping it, even though he had missed breakfast.

*Pretty lights on the tree, I'm watching them shine,
you should be here with me, Baby please come home.*

The song had cycled through at least six times and he'd refilled his glass and emptied it again. In a moment's decision, Harry carried the bottle into the kitchen and dumped it down the drain. Already he could feel the fuzzy gloom wrapping it's soft talons around his heart and he couldn't allow himself this manner of surrender. He would have to deal with his sorrow the way he always had. With a clear head.

It would be easier, too without Snape around to play haunting music meant to shatter his fragile existence and just plain torment him. He had gone on a broom earlier in the morning, which left Harry relieved, yet curious. Where was Snape getting off to all the time? He had never had a tan before, much less sun-bleached hair. In fact, Snape hardly left the school at all. He took trips in the summer, Harry knew, but now he wasn't even informing anyone of his destination and it made him suspicious.

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There was one other thing that had held his curiosity for months and he retrieved it now, setting the little clam shaped box before him on the table. It felt wrong somewhat, though he had permission, so without further hesitation, Harry opened the lid and let himself be pulled into Draco's fondest memory.

Swirling, drifting snow, and white, frozen ground were all around him. He focused on a park bench where Sara leaned her head against Draco's shoulder. Malfoy himself looked totally at peace and happy for the moment, though there was an injured look in his eyes. Sara's speech was dreamlike in his ears as she declined the flask. *I like you, Malfoy. There's something about you I find mysteriously attractive. And you're fine, like a diamond among ordinary glass. You're consistent, but unpredictable. You're oozing confidence and grace. You're everything your father is, except hateful.* A smile touched her lips. *I think you're beautiful.*

Malfoy appeared overwhelmed with emotion, as no one else had ever seen him, and Harry understood the side of him that only Sara knew. There was nothing but love and desperation in Draco's eyes. *Then give me this one memory.*

Harry watched the kiss for only a very brief time before movement caught his eye and he spotted a

raven, just taking flight. "The blackbird!" He whispered. Suddenly, the scene seemed to pull away and he was back in his chair with a new sense of Draco's real feelings, not the act he put on for the rest of the world. Jealousy crept into his heart, though he shoved it back. The kiss he'd witnessed was not about betrayal or being unfaithful, it was about giving a moment of happiness to someone who would never know it otherwise. Probably for the rest of his life. Harry was not angry, he didn't like what he'd seen, but he understood it. He'd done the very same thing after all, for someone he cared for deeply, but would never love. At least not that way. With a sigh, he returned to the bedroom and took the frame from the closet, stopping to run an amorous hand over the glass. There would be joy in his life again, he knew, if he could only hold on to the hope and the faith he had in Sara. He re-hung the picture and stepped back, his eyes lingering over it. He smiled with the memory.

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23. Moonlight Sonata

Dear Sara,

It's been so long now, I don't know what to think. Your packages have slowed from three or four a week to as many a month. Your song on the wind comes sporadically when you once sang to me every night. Are you forgetting about me? Are you losing interest? It's a fear I have as time passes. That you'll remain in my thoughts as you do now, every day, but that I will fade from your memory. There could be no worse fate.

What are you doing all this time? The flowers have bloomed, the world is green again and the students have taken the O.W.L.S. I gave my final exam today. Soon it will be a year. You've been gone far too long, Sara. I miss you! Everyone said it would get easier as I went along, but they were wrong. The misery I feel at the thought of you is every bit as painful as it was at first, it has just become easier to hide. I only hope you come home soon.

And a home we will have! We could live in the many rooms I have carved under the house. And the house itself has been begun. The whole front, two stories high has been constructed, the base for the little tower is in and the ells have been sealed off with sheets of plastic while the rear part of the house is built. That half hasn't yet been started, as the front half is nothing more than stone walls, bare bones really, and needs to be plumbed and wired still.

I changed the design a bit to include a massive lobby modeled after the room I take my fencing lessons in. It's cool, you'll love it. It takes up a good deal of the upstairs, but it's well worth it. Thirty foot ceiling and six pillars down the center in pairs. There will eventually be marble floors and Brad is arranging for the work to be done. You're family was lucky to have him, Sara. He's indispensable and understands our need for secrecy in certain matters. He only solicits Irish and Scottish contractors. Because of him the front half of the house will be done by the end of summer and the shell of the back should be erected by then, too. I think by next summer we'll be planting the courtyard gardens together. Unless you decide to call it off after what I tell you next.

There is something that weighs heavy on my mind and has since December. The Yule ball, actually. I left the great hall in search of solitude when Ginny found me, alone and sulking in the tower. I was upset over your absence and angry, if I recall, and somehow I ended up kissing Ginny again. It was very short, as I immediately came to my senses, but the fact that it happened at all has bothered me ever since. What does it mean? I still love you as I always have and I have the same, totally platonic feelings for Ginny.

In fact, she hates me now. We've barely spoken in six months and spend no time together. This was my doing. I was cold to her after that, though I had no reason to be, she had done nothing wrong. I suppose I see her as a threat to what I have with you, which I would rather die than compromise. I wish I didn't have to tell you this at all, but you're right. Without honesty between us, there can be no hope for anything. Besides, I've had enough of secrets. Not that it's a secret here at Hogwarts, anyway. I'm sure half of England knows. You've probably read about it in Witch Weekly.

I paid for this mistake in the most humiliating of ways. First I got a howler while preparing for my last Monday class, the one Ginny is in, and Ron and Hermione took turns yelling at me for nearly a minute. I ran to my office with it, but not soon enough. Several students had already come in and a good lot of them were just outside the door and heard the whole thing. I went on with the lesson, pretending nothing out of the ordinary had happened, though the snickers and grins I received were totally embarrassing. On top of that, as if it weren't enough, I approached Ginny at dinner a month later, after ignoring her completely. I only wanted to apologize, but she promptly stood and threw her pumpkin juice in my face. The hall erupted with laughter and I could have died right then and there. Thankfully, McGonagall rushed right over and dragged me off, but first she took 20 points from her own house and gave Ginny detention.

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I understand if you hate me for what I did, as long as you know that it was nothing to me, just a serious lack of judgment (not that I thought about it beforehand) which quickly drove me from the room. I really can't explain. All I could think about was you. All night you dominated my memory and I was in a state when Ginny found me. I was lonely. Pathetic really, and she was the only friend I had in the world just then. My doubts and my frustration with your long absence were tearing me apart and I don't know what I was thinking. Perhaps I needed to see if I still loved you as much as I thought I did? Don't worry Sara, I do.

Other than what I have mentioned, there is very little news. Slytherin won the Quidditch Cup, much to my disappointment. We had such a great record going, but the new Gryffindor team is young, having lost most of it's players in the last two years.

Snape has been unusually chipper ever since he returned from summer holiday all sun-streaked and

smug as ever, then again over Christmas. He was gone the whole week and returned wearing new robes and with a fresh tan. He's been dressing better and keeps his hair trimmed. I swear, he almost looks human with a little color. He was always so pale, all I could think of was "The People Under the Stairs". For a month or so after one of his clandestine journeys he's in a positively splendid mood. I think he might be seeing a woman or something. Either that or he's found the mother of all potions labs in Majorca.

As for me, I don't know what I'll be doing this summer. Longer lessons with Dumbledore, more hours with Seamus. More time with Roland (who I can hold off indefinitely, but can't win against.) Ron and I have tickets to the Quidditch World Cup. Somehow England got a decent team together and are currently semi-finalists. Ireland already has their spot, so it may be a UK game. Either way, it's England's turn to host. Hermione refused to tag along. I'm kind of glad, too. She was always an enthusiastic spectator at school, but she despises the game. All she does is nag me about my hair, anyway. It's grown to my shoulders and it looks weird, but I like it. Maybe I'll keep it awhile if you like it too.

I can't help thinking you'll come back to me soon. The last day of school. The one year anniversary of the night you left. I have the strongest feeling about it. I wasn't going to mention it, just in case I'm wrong, but it just seems right to me. I hope so, Sara. I'll be waiting.

Love, Harry

** * **

Wearing Sara's favorite green sweater, (which was beginning to show signs of age from being worn constantly) comfortable jeans, and barefoot, Harry took his seat at the end of the head table. Since the train had pulled out early that morning, the chairs had been rearranged so that they were facing each other instead of the empty hall. He was relieved at this. He'd spent the last six months catching Ginny's hateful glances from the Gryffindor table. Though, her departure left him feeling guilty and the situation was still unresolved. He'd been afraid to approach her after the incident with the pumpkin juice.

He was glad the students were gone. Harry had come to relish the quiet and the solitude. He liked to be alone with his thoughts. To wander the halls uninterrupted by a friendly greeting or a group noisy third years. To no longer have the responsibility of teaching, leaving him with more time for his training, the Swill factory, and the house.

And for Sara, who he thought he might see tonight. He held out hope for her return, looked forward to the passing of hours with a secret exhilaration, an anticipation he dared not fully believe, but yet he did. He had the strangest feeling.

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The stirring melody of Beethoven's soft, passionate ode to nighttime, Moonlight Sonata, drifted through his head as he remembered their last night together. She loved to play this song in the gossamer light, and they often danced together on the roof under the stars in their pajamas, silent, enjoying the closeness that calmed and pacified the soul. The sound of this smooth and haunting dark eloquence had surrounded them the last time he'd seen her, looking up at him in the light of the moon that spilled in through the glass, her eyes so trusting, her hand touching his face, whispering the word he'd waited so long to hear. He hadn't thought it possible to feel so much, to love someone so completely than he had then, or to have it returned so equally.

He let himself fall into the memory, her hair pooled around her in a sea of black and gold, the emotion in her kiss, in her touch. He hoped they would have more nights like that one, but which ended with waking up to the dawn and the sight of her sleeping face next to him on the pillow. Their fingers entwined between them.

"What are you daydreaming about, Potter?" Snape mused, "By the look on your face, I can only imagine who."

Harry straightened up. "I wasn't daydreaming."

"Then you were ignoring the Headmaster? Perhaps you'd like to explain why you've failed to answer his question."

"I was just thinking." Harry explained, then turned his eyes to Dumbledore. "I'm sorry, sir. I wasn't listening."

"It wasn't important." He smiled, "Ah, dinner is here."

Harry picked at his food as he thought about last night. He'd waited for Sara on the roof, finally falling asleep in a chaise lounge around daybreak, wrapped in a heavy robe. It was agonizing, for she failed to show with every tick of his father's watch. It was then that he realized Sara had left in the early morning hours, so technically, the date of her departure did not expire until this midnight, and he was almost certain.

"I assumed you'd be gone by now, Snape." He challenged.

"In the morning, actually." Snape smirked, "My friend is traveling and won't be settled until then."

"Traveling." Harry said, his mind racing, the word striking a connection that in turn sparked his anger.

He glared at Snape. "Why didn't I see it before! You're going to see Sara!"

Snape looked surprised, fumbling for a way out. He said nothing.

Dumbledore raised his brows. "Severus? Is that true?"

Snape wanted to defend himself, but finally just lowered his eyes in an admission of guilt.

"You bastard." Harry growled, "How dare you not tell us?"

"It's none of your business where I go and whom I see, Potter. How dare you address me in such a manner."

"I'm sure Professor Dumbledore would like to know how his niece is doing." Harry looked to

Dumbledore, who appeared less than pleased. He met Harry's eyes and turned his attention back to Snape.

"I think we would all like to know if Sara is well."

"She's better." Snape sighed and tossed his napkin onto his plate. "She still has her days, but on the whole I think she has vastly improved from when I first saw her."

Dumbledore breathed relief.

Harry narrowed his eyes, furious that Snape had known all this time and had left them all in the dark.

"Where is she?"

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"If she wanted you to know, Potter, I'm sure she would tell you. It's not my place to divulge her whereabouts. Not like I would tell you if it was."

"Severus!" Dumbledore grew angry, "Harry has as much right to ask after Sara as I do. She has been gone a year now without word and every person at this table is worried about her. I suggest you answer our questions."

"I won't tell you where she is. I gave my word."

"How she is will suffice."

"She's depressed." Snape said, picturing Sara in her all black hair, but refusing to tell the Headmaster about that. It was the most troubling thing about Sara and would certainly send his worry into near panic. "She cries a lot, mostly over her dear Mr. Potter, but she deals with it admirably. It will please you to know that I haven't seen her drink more than a single glass of wine. Not once."

Harry smiled at this. He had his fears about Sara and her willingness to drown her sorrow.

Dumbledore looked relieved. "Yes, Severus. That is good news."

"She shops most of the time. Or sleeps. I see her writing for hours, but she won't tell me what about."

At this Harry's smile widened.

"Does she ever sing?" Dumbledore wondered, concerned that she wasn't using her emotional outlet, which would be a bad sign indeed.

"Mostly at night, but yes. I've heard her many times. And there was one occasion while in Venice.

Sara and I were having dinner in a dim little cafe when she suddenly left her chair, went onto the riser and started playing the piano."

"Splendid." Dumbledore smiled.

Harry, who had sat quietly, suddenly spoke up, his voice hushed and thoughtful. "What did she play?"

"Beethoven." Snape growled in reply.

"The Moonlight Sonata?"

"I guess so. Classical music is not really my specialty." He turned back to Dumbledore, "Anyway, she received a standing ovation and ducked demurely back to her seat. It seemed to me that she had forgotten there were others present."

Dumbledore gave a brief nod of understanding, but Harry spoke up again. "I'll bet she played with her eyes closed."

"She did."

Snape was tired of answering to Harry, mostly because it was his fault the Headmaster had become angry. Snape resented being told to respond to Potter's stupid, insignificant questions and thought he'd retaliate, just a little bit. "The nicest young man came to sit at our table. He was a musician and seemed quite taken with Sara."

"Severus..." Dumbledore warned, but Snape pushed ahead.

"He also played the piano. Obviously, the two of them had a lot in common and fell into a discussion that lasted more than an hour. In fact, he began frequenting the palazzo. He took to playing a keyboard while Sara sang along. I think they were really hitting it off."

"Nice try, Snape." Harry hissed, insanely jealous and feeling his anger rise.

"It's the truth, I assure you. I'll be happy to take a veritas serum if necessary."

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Harry realized Snape wasn't lying about the musician, but he refused to believe Sara met the man's visits with romantic interest. He also realized that Sara had asked Snape to postpone his trip until tomorrow, meaning there was a very good chance she meant to return to Hogwarts this very evening. She had to know the school year had ended and Snape was free to leave this morning. Why tomorrow? Harry smirked, thinking Snape was about to be proven wrong, if his instincts were right anyway.

"Well you don't really think that an attractive young girl like Sara would stay single all this time, did you Potter? I've never seen her go out unescorted." He was thinking of the muggle, Sanders, who went everywhere with Sara, but thought he would forget to mention the fact. "I knew you were naive, but I had no idea you thought her life stood still. Just because time stopped for you a year ago, it doesn't mean Sara's wasting her days as you are, waiting for someone to return. Someone who may never come back. At least not to you."

Dumbledore's voice was a hushed whisper. "That's enough, Severus."

Harry stared at his plate, his hands twisting in his lap. "You're a liar." He said and raised his eyes to Snape's.

Snape's face split in a large smile and he leaned back in his chair, folding his arms across his chest.

"That's what you think."

"Why are you saying these things?"

"I hate to see you wasting your time in such a way. Trusting fool though you are."

Harry jumped to his feet, toppling his chair. "Sara is never a waste of my time!"

Snape stood casually, rearranging his robe before turning calmly back to Harry. "Even I was surprised at how easily she seems to forget about you. It seems it's only when she's alone that you cross her mind. Don't take it personally, Potter. She only wanted to let you down easy."

"Shut-up," Harry fumed. "Am I supposed to believe that she told you all of this?"

"Some things are obvious, except maybe to you. You don't even realize you've been dumped, cast aside for the bigger, better deal. It's as it should be. She's too good for you anyway."

Harry drew his wand and pointed it at Snape's head. His voice was at the edge of control and restraining fury. "How dare you speak of her that way! Sara's no Slytherin, Snape."

"No, but tell me, when was the last time you heard from your faithful Sara? In fact, isn't Draco also missing without word? I do recall the two of them being rather close. Especially on one occasion that I remember quite clearly."

"What are you trying to say? That they're together?" Harry gave an angry laugh, incredulous, but worried beyond reason. It seemed Snape was voicing every secret fear he had and was passing it off as fact. "I'll never believe it. Sara loves me. She wouldn't lie about that."

"Believe whatever you want, but if you think she's not falling asleep beside someone else at night, you're more foolish than I thought."

Harry threw down his wand, grabbed Snape by the throat, and slammed him up against a pillar. Snape, caught off guard, failed to reach his wand and was without defense. Harry's eyes burned with rage, his teeth clenched. "Say one more word about her, just one and I'll kill you."

Snape's eyes widened and Harry felt a fury he had never known as he pushed hard against Snape's throat, leaving him gasping for breath. A cold stillness, an alien satisfaction flooded his being and his grip was like steel as it tightened.

Dumbledore and McGonagall were on their feet, unsure of what to do. Severus had obviously been pushing Harry toward a confrontation, and now it seemed he had what he'd wanted, only he was choking and Harry smiled with a frightening implication of vengeance. A faint greenish-silver light clung to his scar.

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The look on the teachers' faces turned grave. Dumbledore took a step forward, but Minerva grabbed his arm. "Albus," she whispered, "Don't touch him."

He looked at her with uncompromising eyes. "I shall never fear Harry Potter."

The old wizard laid a gentle hand on Harry's shoulder as Snape's eyes rolled back in his head. "Harry. That's enough."

Harry felt himself back up a step, could feel the slight pressure of a hand pulling him away, heard the Headmaster's voice, and watched as Snape fell into his chair, gasping for air, but he felt aloft, not himself. This was his anger, but somewhere his sense of reason had stepped aside. Confused, he turned to Dumbledore, who stood regarding him with patience and understanding. Their eyes met and Harry felt lost, dazed, and surreal. He looked at his hand as if it were foreign, the phosphorescence gone from his scar as if it had only been a trick of the light. He dropped his hand to his side, taking in a shocked and nervous breath. His voice was barely a whisper. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... I would never..." He turned and walked from the room slowly, as if stunned, taking the stairs one at a time until he had vanished from sight.

Snape's voice was raspy and strained as he recovered in his chair, a hand lingering about his throat.

"Did you see..."

"Yes, Severus." Albus said as he stared at the passage down which Harry had vanished, his expression grim. "I certainly did."

* * *

Harry sat alone on the roof of the tower, staring out at the stars. He was lost in thought, horrified over what had happened at dinner, wondering where the rage had come from. It had swallowed him, transformed him into someone he was not even remotely familiar with. It was a side of himself he had never known existed. He got mad all the time, even felt compelled to fight with Draco, but he'd never wanted to kill anyone.

He despised Snape, that was true, and felt justified in becoming angry over the way Snape had spoken of Sara, but when had he decided to choke him? He had no memory of it. One minute he was standing there, the next his hand was around the man's throat. But more than that, it was the feelings he'd had. The thrill, the satisfaction. He was ashamed of himself, didn't even know where to begin apologizing. He wondered if he even could.

He was not surprised when Dumbledore made his way onto the roof. Harry didn't turn around, only sat where he was, his troubled eyes fixed on the sky. "I understand if you want me to leave." He said. "I think you know me better than that, Harry." Dumbledore approached and took the chair next to his.

"Relocating the problem doesn't solve anything."

"I don't know what happened, sir." He hung his head. "I have no idea."

"Are you sure about that? See, I think you do have at least a little knowledge of the source of your anger."

"But I don't! I can't stand Snape. I threaten to kill him all the time, but I would never really do it! Never! I didn't even feel like myself. It was as if I was standing aside, watching my hand move on its own, thinking someone else's thoughts."

"I have noticed in the past year or so that you've developed a rather short fuse."

"I know. And I don't understand that either. I've gotten into fights with Draco. I even got mad at Hermione once, and she hadn't really deserved it. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"Tell me, what is it that triggers such a response in you? What seems to be the focus?"

Harry thought for a moment, realizing that every time he'd lost his temper, or even came close, it always had to do with the same thing. "Sara."

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"Precisely. Harry, it is normal for a teenaged boy to go through such a stage, just as it is normal to want to protect the ones we love above all others."

"Yet I'm quite certain it is not normal to attempt murder over something so ludicrous as what Snape was saying. I didn't believe a word of it."

"Yes, true. Very true." Dumbledore stroked his beard, remembering the faint glow on Harry's scar.

"Do you remember when I told you that Voldemort had transferred some of his powers to you?"

"Of course I do."

"Voldemort is a wizard who enjoys violence. Perhaps a bit of that rubbed off on you, too."

"You can't blame what I did on Voldemort. I let Snape get to me, sir. I wanted to strike out at someone and he's always good for that. But I never wanted to hurt him. Or anyone else for that matter. Not unless I have to."

"I think you need to find a way to manage your emotions, Harry. You are not an angry or violent person. You are simply a young man who has been through a tremendous amount of emotional stress and is going through a phase. I assure you, it will go away."

"I hope you're right."

"Trust me." Dumbledore smiled. "If you find yourself having such feelings again, I do hope you'll remember to control yourself."

"Of course, sir." Harry hung his head.

"If you feel that control slipping away, I suggest you leave the room before we find our potions professor in several pieces." Dumbledore smiled and let a hand pat Harry's shoulder affectionately.

"I'll see you in the morning, Harry. Let's plan for a late start. After lunch let's say. Sleep in, you could use some rest with the schedule you keep."

"Yes, Professor." Harry acquiesced, but didn't move from his chair. "Good night."

Dumbledore wore a worried expression as he glanced back at Harry's forlorn shape, black against the moon, head bowed, shoulders slumped. He sighed when he saw the bed was back on the roof. He let himself out.

* * *

Harry stood and paced the roof. The moon had crossed the sky and there was but a few fleeting minutes left of the night. He had waited many hours there for Sara, ever hoping the very next moment would be a joyous one. Time ticked off on his wrist as he'd watched the sky, the only sound in the silence except that of the wind and an occasional creature of the night. Impatiently he watched for a faint glimmer of satin in the distance, thinking every passing bird was his old Firebolt in the dark. Harry looked down at his green sweater and jeans. His feet were warm against the stone and a balmy breeze drifted up from the lake. He rested against the wall and let it brush the hair from his face. His heart sank like lead in his chest as the sun broke the horizon. The day was new again. Sara wasn't coming.

His slumped shoulders and sad, dejected eyes revealed his disappointment as he climbed onto the coverlet and clutched Sara's pillow to his chest. He stared at the empty side of their bed, feeling a lump rise in his throat. He couldn't cry. Didn't have the strength to. It was just his hope that she would come home that had led him to believe so strongly. And it was a foolish thought at that. He got the feeling he would never see her beautiful face again, never rejoice in her laughter or delight in her smile. Once again Snape's words drifted through his mind and it was with them that Harry crashed into troubled dreams.

* * *

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Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata played softly on repeat as it had throughout the night and Sara watched from the window, closed and locked, as the sun came up. She had been unable to sleep and now took her seat on a steamer trunk, looking around at her luggage with an immense sigh. She had thought of Harry all night, which wasn't unusual, but she'd felt driven to go home and even held the port-key in her hands for well over an hour at some point. She wondered why he was so heavy on her mind, but she knew the answer, of course. Because he was thinking about her, too. He wanted her to return and Sara could feel his need and his desperation.

This knowledge brought her the greatest anguish, for she longed to see him, and her Uncle Albus, and Minerva and Hagrid, Ron and Hermione. She missed them so much, missed Hogwarts and the cottage. She even missed Draco. A year had passed since she'd left them all and it seemed a lifetime. Staying away was never more difficult, but she wasn't ready to go home.

She heard Mr. Sanders clamoring about in his room and stood. It was time to minimize her belongings and prepare for the journey. She went about the task with an exhausted sigh, partially from her sleepless night, mostly from her many recent moves.

Sara and Greg had stayed briefly in many cities in the past few months. Florence, Berlin, Oslo, Barcelona, Lisbon, Moscow, Marseille, Athens, and several others. She had been in so many cities they tended to blend together, but she had been careful to keep her distance from the British Isle. Getting too close would test her resolve. Best to stay away altogether.

She sent them packages when she could, but Sara rarely ventured out and she only used rented owls. She didn't want to attract too much attention as long as she was being watched. It was mostly at night

when she sensed their presence, but she'd been followed during the day as well. She'd voiced her challenge more than once, pushing her thoughts at them, daring them to come out and face her, but there was never an answer. They simply stayed in the shadows, but she felt their menace. Moving seemed to be the best idea. It usually took them weeks to find her, though she rarely got a decent night's sleep. The smallest noises disturbed her, sending her bolt upright with a gasp and a tremor of fear. A branch tapping against the window in the breeze, the moans of an old house, Topenga stirring in her cage, Greg turning over in bed in the next room... everything woke her it seemed. She could only wonder how long it would be before she found out what they wanted. This morning, however, she was alone. The three who had taken sentry last night had presumably gone to get some sleep no more than 15 minutes ago and it was almost time for her to slip out of Prague and into Austria.

Greg was dressed and sloppily shaven when he came in, eyes tired, coffee in hand and a cup of tea for her as well. She smiled at his small gesture, too sleepy to properly shave, but he'd managed to find the time to brew her some English Breakfast.

"What's wrong?" he asked as he handed it to her. Her weary eyes and heavy expression worried him. "If you were in love with a girl and she left you in the middle of the night, refused to write, refused to see you, but promised to return, would you grow to hate her, Greg?"

"It depends. I suppose if I loved her enough, I always would, but I can't say I wouldn't have my moments of doubt."

Sara gave him a disheartened smile.

"What's on your mind, Sara?" He asked and set down his mug, "Do you finally want to talk about it? I'll respect your wishes, but I'm tired of pretending he doesn't exist."

"I miss him, Greg. There are no words to describe how I miss him."

"Then go see him. I'll take you back to England this minute if you want."

After her long, sleepless night of feeling Harry's pain and her own, Sara snapped. Her voice rang out through the empty rooms, her cup of tea smashed against the wall with a liquid crash. "I can't! Don't you understand anything? I can't go home, okay?"

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"I'm sorry!" Greg was quick to sputter, though his eyes had grown wide as a small red streak melted down the side of her black hair, the floor trembled and a blast of wind rattled the windows and toppled things in the yard. "Sara, I didn't mean it."

"I don't care what you meant!" She yelled, "You don't know how I feel! You don't know anything!"

"I'm just trying to be a friend! We've been pretending Harry doesn't exist for too long and all it does is make things harder on both of us. Especially you. You need to talk about it!"

"Who are you to presume to know what I need?" Sara shouted, "And for your information, I do talk about it, just not with you."

"Go home! Enough of this running away!"

"I don't need your advice, Greg. What I do is none of your business."

"Sara, something strange is happening," Sanders swallowed hard, "Your hair is changing colors and I think we're having an earthquake."

Suddenly realizing the extent of her anger, Sara ran from the room and slammed the door when she reached her own private space. She fell on the bed and sobbed into her pillow, horrified by the way she had treated Greg, who only wanted to help, overwhelmed by her grief and her desire to see Harry. The tremors were replaced by a thunderstorm that darkened the sky, but there was no hurricane. Sara had learned to moderate the energy that flowed from her, but couldn't control it completely. The winds raged, but the windows did not break. Lightning did not strike the trees in the yard.

Eventually Sara calmed and so did the weather, first turning to a steady rain, then a light shower until it had all but stopped. Slowly, the morning sun peeked out from behind the clouds and she dried her eyes. There was a soft knock at the door, to which she sat up, then Greg poked his head in sheepishly. There was an apology in his expression, along with a seriousness she had never seen in him before.

When he saw she was receptive to his presence, he opened the door and stepped fully into the room, coming to stand before her. "What are you?" He asked.

"Just a girl." She tried to smile.

"I may not be the smartest guy on the planet, but I'm not stupid, or blind for that matter. Shrinking luggage. Freak storms, earthquakes, strange Professors who show up in mere seconds. I won't even mention your hair, which is scientifically and biologically impossible. Radios that turn on by themselves, birds who carry your mail. I demand to know. Tell me or I'm leaving."

Sara sighed, knowing this moment was inevitable. She had decided that if he asked she would tell him, even though it broke the first rule of the wizarding code of conduct. However, she refused to use a memory charm on Mr. Sanders. She just couldn't do it. Besides, if he knew, they could travel by broom and life in general would be a lot less complicated.

"I'm a witch, Greg."

"A witch?"

"That's right. A witch." She smiled warmly, "There are things in this world that most people don't know exist."

"So you cast spells on people and make brews and stuff? Sorry, but this just isn't sinking in." He gave a nervous laugh, "So I suppose you ride around on a broom and cackle?" He laughed again, incredulous.

Sara held out her hand. "Accio broomstick." Greg backed up a quick step as it flew across the room

and directly into her hands. "Finite."

Greg's eyes grew wide when the common kitchen broom turned into Harry's well-worn Firebolt. "As a matter of fact, yes. Only minus the cackling bit."

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"You're not kidding, are you?"

"I assure you, I'm not. Now we have to leave here. Get your things. I shrunk them last night." Greg backed out of the room, looking stunned and Sara got herself together before hurrying to the living room for the backpack full of luggage she'd left there. It was best to fly under cover of night, but they would be watching then for sure and she wanted to see Severus. He would meet her this morning in Vienna and she could hardly wait. She missed her confidant, her friend, but mostly she wanted news on Harry.

She was startled by a face in the window. She gasped, backing up a step, her eyes glued to his. The man grinned at her, then fled. Sara threw open the front door and ran out into the yard. A flash of movement in the trees caught her attention and she raced after it, using the wind to propel her along faster than she could run. As soon as she was within striking distance, she conjured her lightning and knocked the fleeing Death eater off his feet.

He writhed in pain on the ground as she circled around him. "What do you want with me?" She demanded. "Why are you and your comrades following me? Did you really think you could pass undetected? I always know when you're there."

"Obviously not." He managed.

She realized he was right. In the midst of her anger and the crying fit that followed, one had come right up to the window without her knowledge. "What do you want."

"Like I'd tell you."

"I know who sent you here to spy on me. I don't need anyone to tell me that. But you can take a message to your lord and master. The next of his kind I encounter will come back in pieces. Do you understand me?"

"I'll do nothing for you."

"There's more lightning where that came from. I won't kill you, you can be sure of that, but I hear it's rather painful." She grinned at the stranger, who had struggled into a reclined sitting position. His cloak was burned clean through near his shoulder and continued to smolder, little tendrils of smoke curling up behind him. "On your feet. Now."

Sara gave him a little blast now and again when he slowed or moved too quickly. By the time they reached the house she'd learned they were after the spell book. There was more, but this he refused to tell.

Sanders hovered about in the living room, unsure of what was going on and not knowing what to do. He paced nervously and asked questions that went largely unanswered. He watched in fascination as Sara enlarged her steamer trunk, opened it, cast a spell, and forced the strange robed gentleman into what appeared to be an entire room inside it. She slammed the lid and locked it as soon as he was in, then cast more spells to keep him in. Once again the trunk shrunk down to a little square and leapt back into her bag. This she shouldered and summoned the broom.

Sara swung her leg over and looked at Greg, wearing his own backpack full of shrunken belongings. "Get on." She said.

He did, tentatively, and off they went, him clinging to her waist, her determined to fly like the wind. Once again, she attempted to use it to push them forward, a newly discovered skill she had hardly mastered. There was only one person on her mind. The one who's council she badly needed. Severus.

* * *

Draco found he was lost in the underground network that Voldemort called home. They had entered through an old ruined castle and he had been trying to find the exit ever since. Now here he was, miles from where he'd started, and everything looked the same. Stone walls. Wooden doors. Acres and acres of them, all identical.

Tired from walking, he slid down the wall and rested, not caring about the dust that clung to his robe.

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After Voldemort learned of his late night visit to Harry the previous summer, the very night he'd received the Dark Mark, Draco had been brought here and remained a prisoner, unable to escape and desperate for freedom. It had been nearly a year since he'd seen the sun and he longed for fresh air, and for the joys of his life that he'd taken for granted, like playing Quidditch. He would give every last galleon he had for a single ride on his broom.

Even his ability to send owls had been taken away, but at least he'd gotten out that one postcard. He imagined what Potter's reaction must have been, receiving a postcard from Hell, and he smiled at his own wit. It had been so very long since he had smiled last.

Remembering Harry and the last weeks they'd spent forming their strange friendship, an idea came to Draco and he brightened with renewed hope. It was in Harry's car, idle on the country roadside surrounded by cows that Harry had set his wand on his open hand and said "Point me, London."

He stood at once. "Point me. Outside."

The wand led him down the tunnel and he followed it. Nearly an hour he walked and his hand ached from balancing the wand, but he knew he was getting closer. The stone was older, the moss thicker, the doors petrified and different.

As he walked he thought of freedom, of leaving behind the constant torture, the "training". Voldemort had tried to break him in every conceivable way and Draco had tried hard to retain his own beliefs and

will, but he was now only a shadow of the Draco who had danced with Sara at the Yule Ball. He'd been worn down and eventually tired of fighting the inevitable. At first he only pretended to yield, but more and more often he found himself believing what he was told, and feeling the hate his father had preached. He hated Sara more than ever. She'd stolen something from him that she could never give back and never make up for. Something he wanted now more than ever.

His father's death should have fallen to him. Killing Lucius would have vindicated every wrong ever done to him and his mother, but since Sara had taken the task upon herself, Draco was left with the festering wounds that would never heal, denying him any sort of closure. He could attribute all the pain in his life to his father and now he would take this pain to his grave with nothing to be done. She had ruined that for him. She had ruined everything, including the part of him that felt love.

He had loved Sara more than anyone he'd ever known. She was the first person to give him respect out of friendship and not fear of retribution. It was a hard lesson to learn. Opening yourself to love and trusting another so completely was a harsh blow when that person chose betrayal over compassion.

Sara had been convincing. He had believed in her and would have died to protect her. And what had she done for him? Taken his only family and left him to deal with it alone. Shattered his trust in others. Placed the ring he'd given her next to his father's corpse and left his life forever.

He reached beneath his shirt and withdrew the small scarlet square she'd given him the last time he'd seen her. As he held it the memory of that night flooded his senses. Sara holding his hand as they laid in his bed, the affection and pain in her face as she said her goodbye. She'd tried to warn him then, telling him he might never look on her the same way again, but he hadn't listened. She'd known he would hate her. She'd seen something in the Orb and knew what was to come. He remembered her words as silent tears fell from her eyes. "Just know that I love you, Draco, for the friend you've been, and I'll always remember you as you are at this moment in time, no matter what becomes of us." He recalled her close embrace, could almost feel his arms around her, could almost smell her perfume as the lost affection flooded his heart and he clutched the Amidon, her voice echoing through his mind. Keep it close to you.

At some point his eyes had fallen closed and now that he opened them, he realized he was crying. He wiped at his face, knowing someday he would see her again, for she had said so herself. Draco looked forward to that day as equally as he dreaded it. He missed her, though he knew what the day would bring. He didn't need a crystal ball to tell him what fate would hold and with a sigh he dropped the Amidon under his shirt and opened the door before him.

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The steps were drier toward the top, telling him he was heading in the right direction. They wound up and up in a wide square spiral and Draco kept a hand on the stone beside him for balance as he hurried up them, careful to keep his thoughts locked behind a brick wall the way they'd learned at Hogwarts. He only hoped he could leave undetected.

It was night, much to his delight, and Draco fell onto the thick grass and rolled onto his back, looking up at the stars, breathing the air and smiling ever so slightly. He needn't run away, for Voldemort could find him no matter how far he managed to get, so he stayed right there on the ground outside the ruins, relishing this moment of freedom. His mind slipped back to another night and he was suddenly two places at once, looking up at the same sky from his place in the grass and from the bed on Sara's roof as Harry tried to deal with his loss and his broken heart beside him. It was Harry whom he wanted to see. Only Harry understood what had happened to him and had somehow become his partner in misery.

"Commendable, Draco." Came a voice from behind him, "No one's ever found their way out before. Tell me, how did you do it? I have to admit, I'm curious."

"I did go to school, you know." He said, afraid his moment of freedom had come to an end too soon.

He didn't move from the cool of the grass, didn't take his eyes from the glittering night sky.

Voldemort circled around to look down at him. "I have never doubted your intelligence or your ability, son of Lucius. And it appears you have come to understand how much I can take from you, and how much I can give."

Draco said nothing.

"What are you thinking?"

"That you're going to take me back underground and keep me prisoner there until I conjure a big vat of poison and drown myself in it. I don't care if I never move from this spot again. I don't suppose you should move my skeleton if I die before I get up."

"What else?"

"Old friends. People I used to care about. People who I am now a danger to and can never see again. I'm thinking about how miserable my life is, how much I hate my father and how wrong everything has gone."

"I have a task for you, Draco. I think it's time for you to return to your life."

"My life is over."

"You have the wrong attitude. Perhaps you've stayed here too long. Your life isn't over, it's just taken a different and more rewarding direction. Tell me what you ended up with in your old life? What have these friends of yours ever given you?"

"Hope."

Voldemort was less than pleased with this response. "And how long did it take for them to turn their backs? I don't see anyone fighting for you, or even looking for you. I think we both know who I mean. You've been forgotten. Besides, who needs a friendship based on pity?"

"You don't know anything. You don't know me."

"You came to me strong of will and as cunning and uncompromising as your predecessor. Now here you are, a pathetic shell of Draco Malfoy. Feeling sorry for yourself and acting like a pitiful schoolboy. Your training was meant to open your eyes, not make you weak. Go home, Draco. Spend some time at your family's estate."

"Thank you." He whispered, his eyes falling closed to imagine what it would feel like to take a warm shower, to sleep in his own bed. "But what will it cost me?"

Voldemort laughed and it was a sinister sound. "There are some books that have come to my knowledge. Books that I need to take possession of. Two of them will be left up to you."

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Malfoy almost smiled when he learned what he was to do and thought the task set to him was right up his alley and would be rather fun. His outlook greatly improved as Wormtail emerged from the ruins carrying a shiny silver racing broom and the rest of Draco's belongings. He slung the bag over his shoulder and climbed onto the lightning Mach 1.

Into the night he flew, headed for London and the comfort of his rented home. His life as a Death eater was begun.

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24. Come as You Are

Dear Sara,

This is becoming too much to deal with. WHEN are you coming home? I haven't received so much as a single word from you in at least a year. Summer came and went, now winter is at it's end again and spring is here for the second time. Yet you have not returned my ring and I still get strange items in the mail, meant for our house, I assume. I hold out hope that your return grows nearer with every passing day, but each of those same days brings renewed doubt, frustration, and my trust is slowly fading. I did not write in this journal for a long time, since I stood alone on the roof last June, waiting for you and you never came. I can't tell you how it made me feel, to be so certain, so excited to see you, and to be so wrong. I felt abandoned all over again and knew I had to let go of you just a little bit more or lose my mind.

I guess I should catch you up.

Summer was ok. It was strange to turn 19, it didn't even seem like I'd ever been 18. I guess time stood still for me and here I'll be turning twenty in just a few months. Strange to think the last time I saw you we were seventeen. Am I ever going to be happy Sara? It would be nice to be able to smile again and mean it.

Thanks for the birthday gifts, I needed a new green sweater. I was just thinking that it needed replacing and then one comes with the post. I do love your ability to know what I'm thinking. Just like with the nautical decor I decided on for the boat landing. Weird, but very handy.

Thanks for all the Christmas gifts, too. I really needed a few new robes, with classes and all. It was so much easier to dress when I was a student and we wore the same outfit every single day. (though I'd be lying if I said I don't love great clothes.) I just wish I could send you something for your birthday. Last year I left your gift by the front door of the cottage so you could blink in and pick it up without venturing through the house, but you returned the note I sent to let you know and the gift was still there when I went back.

In August we went to the Quidditch World Cup and England was in the lead, then lost their seeker to a dirty play by Ireland. They were allowed to designate a replacement player and Ron had me volunteered instantly. Before I knew what was happening, I was on my broom and wearing England's uniform. I was furious with Ron, but I'd forgotten how much I love playing Quidditch and enjoyed the experience thoroughly. It was different, playing with the best in the world, and incredibly difficult, but I managed to catch the snitch to win the game. I wish you could have been there, Sara. You always did like Quidditch and this was my best moment to date. They even gave me one of the trophies and I put it in the house next to my father's plaque.

You should see our house! It's huge, it's beautiful, and it's almost done! The back part went up last summer and they constructed the ells in the fall. The inside, including the wiring and the pipes, was completed over the winter. As soon as the ground dries a little more they'll be finishing off the tile in the courtyard and installing the fountains that mysteriously showed up there. (thank you) I ordered a bunch of lilac trees from New York State and I should be getting them soon. I thought you might like being surrounded by a million purple flowers.

There is a swimming pool in a glass solarium off the back. I know it wasn't in the plans, but I've always wanted one. Since Seamus and I are doing so well, I thought I'd go ahead with it. We don't really even have to work anymore. He's hired people to handle every detail, so we just stop in now and again. Ron and Hermione are in charge of most of it, but they can only work at night. Sometimes Seamus, Neville and I go there when Ron and Hermione are working and no work gets done, unless you count quality control and inspection. (ha ha)

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I made a most interesting hiding place off the stair that leads down to the cave. It's an intricate labyrinth with a locked room at the end. It took me forever, but Snape told Dumbledore the Ka-tet was being sought after and Hermione's book had to become more secure. I don't know how much, if anything Snape told you about Malfoy, but he showed up here last summer and gave me a warning. He only stayed a moment and was extremely rude to me, for show I guess. His note said he was being watched and to not contact him.

A week later, he tossed Ron and Hermione's flat, then showed up at the Burrow. I guess Ginny was running away from a very large spider which had wandered in out of the garden and plowed him over

on the front porch. I didn't hear this first-hand, of course, as she still won't talk to me, but I spoke to Fred and George at their shop in Diagon Alley. (By the way, they just bought the shop next door and knocked out the wall.) Draco said he was there to speak to Mr. Weasley about a muggle artifact he'd found in his father's office, but he was turned away at the door and is not welcome back. I guess he was after Ron's spell book? Hermione seems to think he WANTED to be turned away. He insulted Mr. Weasley and everything.

I have seen Draco very few times. He smiled and raised a hand to me once in Diagon Alley, but he turned away and kept on walking. Ron, Hermione, and I passed him once or twice at The Phantom, but other than that, he's been laying low. Snape seems to think he was given orders and is trying his best not to follow them, but is keeping up appearances. This sounds right to me, given the note of warning and offensive manner. Hermione says it makes sense and I've got Ron trying to come up with a way out for him. We meet in the fireplace and talk about it at night sometimes, but you know how they feel about Malfoy.

My second year of teaching has gone smoothly. The 5th years are now 7th years and I've had some practice. I could see myself doing it forever I guess, but there isn't much free time. I would be expected to sleep here and if you ever come back to me I would want to be at our house. The day you come home is the day I stop teaching.

I went on holiday with Sirius for a week in July. It was great to see him again. I wish I could tell you all about it, but I don't dare write anything down. I swear, I will bring Wormtail to the Ministry one day. And there would be no disappearances of suspect, witnesses, and paperwork. I will clear Sirius' name, even if it's on my deathbed.

Anyway, Dumbledore has taught me so much! Last week we ran an exercise in the forest where targets materialized out of nowhere between the trees, above me and sometimes right behind me. It was pretty rapid-fire, but all I had to do was blow them all up without using my wand. It was cool, I did well and rather liked causing all those explosions. It was kind of empowering.

Roland says my training is nearing it's end and after about a year and a half in his company, I'll be sorry to see him go. I spent a lot of time with Roland, roaming Diagon Alley, going to the Three Broomsticks on Friday nights with Hagrid. He became a permanent fixture in the tower where we talked for many, many hours. He says I'm not a strategist, that I'm simple and straight forward. It's something I guess I've always known about myself. It's why Ron always comes in so handy. And Hermione, too. If I'm simple, she must be the most complicated person on the planet. Well, after you. There's no one more complicated than you, and I don't mean that in an angry way. It's not your fault. I can only imagine how difficult it must be to be you. To have to suffer what I have seen you suffer. No matter how down I became at any point during your absence, I always remembered that it's worse for you.

Come home, Sara. Life is a meager existence without you.

Love, Harry

* * *

"Hello, Severus." Sara smiled, "I'm glad you could come."

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"Hello, my dear." he smiled as she hugged him and pecked his cheek. She was in much better spirits, he immediately noticed. Her whole demeanor was lighter and there was a few golden strands mixed into her hair. Just a few. He thought, he could probably count them. "I heard what you did to the Deathaters. News like that travels far and wide!"

"It was nothing, really. All I did was call on the winds and off they all went. Teach them to try to surround me like that."

"I can only wonder where they all set down?" Snape grinned and led her to the sofa. The house was comfortable enough, but small, just a few stone rooms, decorated nicely, but sparingly. Sara didn't seem to mind. They sat down before the fire. He missed the more tropical locations Sara favored. Romania was like a night in the English countryside, only all day. The small town lay in the shadow of the Carpathian Mountains and was often chilled.

Greg Sanders was in the kitchen cooking a wonderfully aromatic dinner and Vanya, the other elemental, was propped in a green velvet wing-back chair, staring blankly out a small wood-framed window. Her long gray hair, shining in the halo of a table lamp, spilled down the side like quicksilver. Snape wondered how she managed to teach Sara anything in such a state. She appeared to be permanently out to lunch. The Orb of Arassel was by Vanya's right hand, her fingers stroking the base with the slightest movement.

Sara smiled as she poured him a drink and Snape noticed how much she had grown up. Her face retained little of the cuteness it had possessed and her beauty was in general more mature. There was knowledge and conviction in her eyes that hadn't been there before. Strangely, she reminded him of Potter of all people, though he supposed that wasn't such a terrible thing. He was reminded she would turn twenty at the start of next term and wondered where all the time had gone. It seemed just yesterday she was a student in his classroom. She handed him the glass.

"I'm glad you found it okay. Tell me how you've been these last few months."

"News at the school is business as usual I'm afraid. Why don't you tell me about your time here in Romania. I'm sure it's much more interesting."

"There's not much to tell, really. After I scattered the Deathaters it's been pretty boring. I'm tired of capturing them. Besides, Azkaban must have it's hands full with what, sixteen?"

"Twenty-two to be exact."

"I can't believe Voldemort would keep sending them! He's not going to get my book. When will he

realize the fact?"

"Probably never."

"Anyway, Vanya has taught me more in these last few months than I ever learned in my whole life. More than I could ever learn on my own. She passes on all that she knows, unselfishly, and her wisdom, Severus, it's infinite. She showed me how to use the wind against the army of Voldemort's minions. She's shown me everything. You wouldn't believe what I can do." To this she gave a somewhat devilish smile.

"I could only imagine." Snape smiled in return. "Spontaneous combustion?" He mused.

"Yes." Now she grinned wickedly, "I finally learned how to summon fire. Too cool, Sevvie. Wait 'till you see."

He didn't bother complaining about her use of his much hated childhood nickname. The way her eyes lit up just now gave him a spark of hope. The blond strands in her hair, her new confidence. Perhaps, he thought, she was starting to get better? He knew better than to assume anything. He'd thought she was on the rise twice already, only to watch her come crashing back down. Once when she had returned a letter from Potter, the other when she had met a man. Someone she'd grown rather fond of over a few weeks, then suddenly she left the city. The abrupt move was followed by a long spell of grief, which she'd spent moping in bed, refusing to get up.

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Sara held out a hand and within seconds a bright blue ball of flame formed above it, yellow and orange tongues snaking out and fading back, licking the air. She closed her hand and it blinked out. "I can throw it." She bragged, "I'll demonstrate for you later."

"I'll look forward to it."

Mr. Sanders poked his head out of the kitchen. "Hey all, go and sit yourselves down. It'll be done in no time."

* * *

"Show me Draco."

The Orb misted over and she was looking at a family room. The scene was familiar and she had no idea why she was seeing a shaggy haired Harry instead of Draco, but her attention was on Ginny Weasley. This was the Burrow, where she had visited only once, and Ginny was angry. Faint voices drifted through her head as she touched the Orb and Harry blew his nose on a fine linen handkerchief. He's sick. She thought. Why wouldn't Harry just take a potion? Surely Snape kept the hospital supplied and she knew Harry was able to make a simple medicine. Why would he suffer this way?

"See?" She heard Ginny say as she did a short, but very clever spell and revealed an obvious hiding place, "Ron's book is perfectly safe! I'm surprised Dumbledore would question my family's ability to protect this one book!"

"You never know with him. He's a shifty sort." Harry replied as Ginny locked it back up.

"Is that all you came for?"

"Yes." He said matter-of-fact as he grabbed each cuff and straightened his sleeves, then brushed dust off them as he looked around in distaste.

Ginny glared at him.

Harry glanced up and away, as if wondering if he should bother with her, then gave her a bored smile. "How are you?" Harry asked and Sara fully expected him to stick his hands in his pockets, but instead he loosely clasped his hands in front and stood perfectly still. It was an elegant pose that didn't suit him.

"Really! Should I get some more pumpkin juice? You're such a creep, Harry. The way you play with my heart like I have no feelings at all! I don't even know why I'm talking to you right now except Dumbledore sent you. "

"I see." Harry said and something struck Sara as odd. He ran a hand through his hair, as if to slick it back. She had never seen him do this, he always just swiped it out of his eyes, yet the gesture was strangely familiar. "Dumbledore also asked if you could lend him a pair of your mother's knitting needles. Some experiment he's doing."

"That's not Harry!" Sara said aloud and took in a nervous breath, "That's Draco!" The delicate and quirky mannerisms clicked all at once and the recognition was instantaneous. "Ginny you fool, I thought you knew him so well!" She watched, mortified, as Draco/Harry used the same spell to reopen the hiding place and quickly stuffed the book into the front of his pants, then drew his robe around it. He went out to wait for her on the steps, hovering on a silver Lightning Mach 1. Harry, she knew, rode a gold Mach 2. The one she'd bought for herself and gave to him.

Ginny came through the door, her eyes hurt, knitting needles in hand. These she handed to Harry. "Are you sure you're alright?" She asked with a suspicious eye, "You're acting funny."

"I'll be fine, once I get my allergy potion." He sniffled, "I hate spring. Well, bye Ginny."

The scene faded as he split the air with his broom and Ginny went inside and slammed the door.

Sara wasted no time. Throwing a black cloak around her shoulders, she called to Severus as she hurried through the house. "I have to go out!"

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Snape stammered a moment from his place before the fire, but she was through the door and gone before he could utter a word.

The Firebolt was propped against the stone structure of Vanya's house and she threw herself over it, flying swiftly as she dared into the trees of the Dark Forest. She thought of a snippet of conversation from years before where Severus had mentioned having to brew Draco a new batch of his allergy

potion and also an image which she held fast to. Harry with hair past his shoulders, silky but kind of wild, thick and beautiful. She loved the way it looked on him. She imagined how it might feel if she ran her fingers through it. Dragging her mind away from Harry, she sent out her plea, pushing it toward an image she held in her thoughts. Nikolae! I need your help! Sara slowed, a figure coming into view in the path up ahead. Is that you? Yes. Sara stopped a few feet from him and landed with haste and with urgency in her usually calm demeanor. He wore a concealing hood over his eyes and his cloak brushed the ground as he closed the distance between them. His voice hushed in the silence. "What is it, Nikita?" "You took the hairs from some of the Deatheaters awhile ago. Do you still have them?" "Yes." He pulled a handful of vials from his cloak to show her. "We need polyjuice potion. Take me to this old wizard who favors you so kindly. I can pay him." "No need." He reached back into his cloak, "I have some right here." She grabbed his arm and made her broom fly itself back to the little house. "Hold tight to me." She said and as soon as he did, Sara commanded the wind to lift them, propel them through the sky like a shooting star toward London.

* * *

Harry made his way to Dumbledore's office, fresh from the shower. He had concluded his fencing lessons today and Roland had declared him a master swordsman. It was weird, the way it had all come so clear to him. He had been able to hold Roland off for what seemed like forever, at least a year, maybe less, but today he could actually see what Roland would do next. Able to predict his next move, Harry defeated him in less than ten minutes, his sword at Roland's throat. He couldn't wait to tell the Headmaster.

"Ice Mice." He said and stepped onto the stairs as they descended, then lifted him to the entrance. The place was a shambles when he pushed open the door and there was Roland, rummaging through a cabinet, his back to Harry, obviously searching for something and without permission. He went about his chore with nervous haste and Harry silently drew his wand. "Would you mind explaining," Harry said, jolting Roland to stand and spin around, terror in his expression. "exactly why you're tossing the Headmaster's office?"

"He was h-h-holding something for me. Go on now, Harry. Leave me to my task, I assure you Dumbledore knows I'm here."

"Somehow I doubt that." Harry indicated the chair Dumbledore kept for students, facing the larger one behind his desk. "Sit down and don't try anything funny. Not if you want to remain conscious."

"You don't understand." Roland said as he took his seat, "Stow your wand and I'll be on my way."

"Not much chance of that. I want to know what you were looking for."

There came a voice like aged parchment from behind and Harry moved to see and kept his wand trained on his prisoner. "He was looking for this." Dumbledore pulled Harry's black spell book from within the folds of his cloak.

"That's what I thought." Harry sighed, turning back to face Roland. "I trusted you. I considered you a friend and an ally."

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"I'm sorry, Harry. You don't understand!"

Dumbledore came forward. "Don't be too hard on him, Harry. Roland is not a Deatheater."

"But he works for Voldemort!"

"Yes, but perhaps we should hear his reasons."

Harry turned a skeptical eye on his instructor. "This should be interesting. Alright then. Why are you after my book?"

"To save my family." Roland sighed and slumped in defeat. "When the Headmaster asked me to come to Hogwarts to train you I was relieved, for my wife and five children needed the money. I had resorted to prize fighting just to put food on the table. I was also quite honored to be asked. It's not everyday one gets to train the likes of Harry Potter! I was foolish in my pride. I went to the pub in the village, drank countless pints with a group of good fellows, and bragged about my new appointment. I took little notice of three wizards who sat quietly in a dark corner, keeping to themselves mostly, but they seemed to take a keen interest in my story. They bought my next two pints and a round for the fellows I was with in exchange for a bit of conversation, which I was more than happy to give, drunk as I was by then."

Harry's face was expressionless. "Deatheaters."

"Must have been. A few days later they returned, only not to the pub. I was awakened in the night as they stood over the very bed I share with Moira." His face grew dismal. "They took my eldest son and won't return him until I give them that book." He pointed at the volume in Dumbledore's hands.

"I see." Harry said, thinking over this new information.

"You see Harry, I had no choice. They'll kill him if I don't do as they ask! I'm not an evil man. Just a very worried father. I never wanted to betray your trust."

Harry looked to Dumbledore. "I'd suggest a veritas serum, but I'm afraid I believe him, sir."

"As do I, Harry. Roland is a good, honest wizard, as was his father before him. And I sense no deception from him. However, if what he says is true, there is a young man's life at stake and that is a problem."

Harry came to life and stowed his wand. "Keep him here. I need to find Ron and Hermione."

"You have a plan?"

"I hope so, but without Sara, it might be hopeless. May I use the chamber?"

"Of course."

* * *

"What do you want?" Draco sneered, annoyed by the two ugly wizards who'd rung his doorbell.

"The master has sent us to collect what you've only recently acquired."

"Already? I only got here an hour ago!"

"May we step inside, sir?"

"Give me your names first."

Sara spoke right up. "Why my dear, it's Mrs. Parkinson! You attended Hogwarts with my daughter, Pansy."

"Oh." Draco said and made a face, "Her. Actually, I think I remember you from my father's ridiculous Deathater parties." He turned to Nikolae. "Well? Who the hell are you?"

"You must remember Aleister Greingrass!" Sara exclaimed.

"Pleased to see you again, Mr. Malfoy." Nikolae bowed his head in greeting. "Now may we come in?"

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"I guess." Draco stepped aside to permit them entrance, "Just stay on the mat and I'll get it. Your shoes are filthy." He shook his head as he walked away, mumbling in irritation.

Sara turned to Nikolae and sent her thoughts to him, her brow wrinkled. "He's a bastard! He actually thinks he's too good to associate with us!"

Nikolae smiled. "He's your friend, not mine."

"Now how do I know the two of you won't lose this?" Draco wondered, holding the book protectively to his chest. "It took me forever to get to it and it wasn't easy. Why didn't Voldemort collect it himself?"

Nikolae went to speak, but Sara stopped him. "The Master can't be expected to do everything personally, you know! He did, however, send along a message for you. He said your cleverness will be well rewarded. He will call on you soon. Until then, stay here and keep a low profile."

Finally, Draco smiled. "Well, it was pretty clever. Although it doesn't take much to fool Ginny Weasley. There are chimps smarter than her. Put a red wig on a troll and she'd think it was her own mother."

Sara was amazed at the side of Draco she had never seen, the side everyone told her existed. He was rude and nasty, but somehow he looked even better than he had last time she'd seen him. His beautiful platinum hair spilled over his shoulders, straight and fine as silk. She missed him so much it was hard to be this close and not tell him who she really was.

"What about the others?"

"What do you mean?" She asked.

"The other books?" He looked at her like she was the world's biggest idiot and her temper flared a little.

"Well, there isn't much news. We aren't told much, but we do know that the Elemental has thwarted all attempts."

Nikolae remembered to scowl. "We had her surrounded, at least a hundred wizards strong, but she obliterated our offensive from where she stood. We lost several of our brothers and sisters that night."

"Our what?" Draco laughed, "This isn't the Brady Bunch, you know. Just a bunch of life's losers who work for some psycho bastard who thinks he's the damn antichrist. Powerful as he may be, he'll never get his hands on Sara's book."

"What makes you so sure about that?"

Draco studied the floor for a moment, then looked at her with sad eyes. "I know her, okay? We used to be friends. Until she killed my father, that is." He touched the Amidon through his shirt. "Here." he thrust the book into the vampire's hands. "Now get out." He turned his back and walked away, shoulders slumped.

Sara felt tears in her eyes. "She never meant to hurt you, Malfoy."

Draco spun around, but Geingrass and Pansy's mother had already closed the door. He'd made it halfway across the room when it started to rain and he froze, remembering the way Mrs. Parkinson had fidgeted with her necklace, the way she'd tipped her head slightly when she'd smiled warmly at him. "Oh shit." He said and dropped into the nearest chair.

* * *

London was hot, even though night was upon the city. It was still humid and the fog was everywhere. Harry stood in the haze, looking around for Ron and Hermione's door. The locator said they were both "home" and he was glad of it. At least he didn't have to hunt them both down separately.

Hurrying toward the duplex, he wondered about his plan. How could it possibly work without Sara?

They had discussed it at length during one of their late night sessions through the fireplace and

Hermione had a few ideas, but it just didn't seem possible.

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He rang the bell and waited.

Ron's grin faded when it wasn't returned and was replaced by puzzlement. Harry wore a grave expression and was immediately whisked inside. "What is it, Harry?"

"Remember what we talked about? Making duplicate spell books?"

"Of course. Hermione's been researching it non-stop at the Ministry for weeks. She thinks she's onto something, but I've had to run the Swill Factory all by myself!"

Harry pushed past Ron and ran up the few steps to the living area. He found Hermione at the kitchen table, a dozen books open before her.

"Hi Harry." She said without looking up from her note taking. "I thought that was you."

"Hermione, what did you find? Ron said you might know how to make Sara's book without her."

"I do, but it's a little tricky. We would need some things from her, things we don't have, but I think it's possible if we can manage to get them."

"Come to Hogwarts with me, both of you! get your notes and anything else you need. I'll explain on the way."

Just then there was another knock on the door and soon Ron reappeared with a very distraught Ginny in tow. She was crying, talking too loud, mentioning Harry's name countless times and so upset that Harry grew worried and Hermione stood beside him. They shared a concerned glance.

The second she saw Harry, she grew frantic. "Harry, please tell me you just came to the Burrow! It was you, wasn't it?"

"Uh...well, no. I came straight here from Hogwarts."

She threw herself into Ron's arms. "Oh no! What have I done?" She sobbed, "I don't know who it was!"

"Ginny, what are you talking about? What happened, why are you upset?"

"The book!" She cried, "You came to the door and asked to see it!"

"I came to the door?"

"But it wasn't you! I knew it! You were acting weird and something didn't seem right."

"Ginny. Where is the book now?"

She closed her eyes, as if the confession was too unbearable. "It's gone."

* * *

Flourish and Blott's was closed, but the proprietor lived above the shop and he was happy to help. He had to order the books normally, but because of who was asking and the urgency and seriousness he saw in their eyes, he volunteered to apperate to the home of the wizard that had made their spellbooks.

"I'm sure he could be swayed to expedite your order for the right price." Mr. Flourish explained.

In a huddle, they pooled their money and Harry gave him 30 galleons, 20 for the wizard and ten for the proprietor himself. "I'll owl Gringott's and have them transfer 200 galleons." Harry offered. They're to go directly to Hogwarts as soon as they're ready. It's a matter of life and death."

"Coming from you, Mr. Potter, that is not a surprise. I'll do my best."

"Thank you." He said as the man blinked out and Harry turned to Hermione and Ron. "We should go.

We have to talk to Dumbledore."

Ron was hesitant. "Do you think Ginny will be alright?"

"She'll be fine, Ron. The sleeping potion won't wear off until morning." Hermione told him. "Go on, now. Grab Harry's other arm."

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With barely a thought, Harry apperated the three of them back to Hogwarts.

* * *

"So you see, Professor," Hermione explained, "All we need is a mini pensieve, some of Sara's blood and a lock of her hair. Sara will need to make the pensieve herself, using the memory of the first binding and a contrived memory to change the crux cube to something harmless. The blood and hair we need to fool the book into thinking she's really there."

Harry wandered a step forward. "So, all we have to do is perform the spell inside the pensieve! Brilliant!"

"Did you expect anything less from Hermione, Harry?" Dumbledore smiled, "Yet I have to admit, I never would have thought of it myself. A pensieve! Excellent work, Miss Granger."

"Thank you, sir." She beamed, "But we'll need all three remaining books as soon as possible. Mr. Flourish thought he could have the books here by tonight. Morning at the latest. We'll need to make copies."

"That could be a problem." Dumbledore stroked his beard, "It will take time for Fawks to find Severus. Not much time, but we don't know how far away he is."

"We might have to wait for hers, if she'll send it at all." For the first time, Harry sensed Hermione was upset with Sara. "Too bad we don't have Ron's. We could just fake it. Put in what we remember from reading it."

Ron let his fist hit the table. "I can't believe we lost one of the books! And all because my sister couldn't differentiate between someone she's known for years and someone she doesn't know at all!"

Harry was quick to defend. "It's not her fault, Ron. Don't blame Ginny. I have a good idea of who my impersonator was, and he knows me well enough to pull it off."

"Well, we don't need to copy my book, anyway. It's probably already in Voldemort's hands."

Dumbledore sighed. "We'd better decide what the new set will do. Miss Granger, can you find a way for the three new books to interact with the recently stolen book?"

"Hedwig!" Harry said, surprised to see his own bird flying in with a note for him. A single scrap of paper, folded in half. All eyes turned to him as he read the few quick words. "I'll be right back. Go ahead without me." He said and hurried out of the room.

Harry read the note again as he headed for the third floor.

Potter,

Come to your tower immediately.

D.M.

He continued down the hall past the entrance to Gryffindor House, then made a few lefts and rights until he found the large door that was somehow rather easily missed. Draco, he found, was waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs.

"Malfoy! What are you--"

"I need that book!"

"I've had enough of books for one day."

"He won't kill me, Potter, he's promised me that, but I assure you I'll wish I was dead. You don't understand what he'll do when he finds out I lost it!"

"You lost the book!?"

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Draco recoiled, momentarily stunned. "You mean it isn't here?"

"As far as I knew you had it!"

"It was Sara! She came to the door as one of his people. I was totally fooled. It wasn't until she said something that was profoundly her own and hurried away that I put it together. She held her necklace. There was a certain uniqueness to her demeanor, and her countenance held a million points of recognition. It seems she's managed to make a fool of me yet again. I'm beginning to think it's a hobby of hers."

Harry was grinning. "Malfoy, you just made my day."

"Shove off, Potter." Draco sulked, "It's my skin after all, and most likely my sanity. You don't know what I've been through, just know it was very, very unpleasant and I'd really hate to see him when he's angry. You have to help me."

"Why? It seems you're enjoying that mark on your arm. Breaking into people's flats, passing yourself off as me in order to steal something that belongs to us! You've been a menace to the Weasleys! And for what? So you can give the book to your lord and master? The very wizard who killed my parents and Sara's as well? Malfoy, you refused my help more than once. Now you have to deal with the consequences of your own bad decisions."

The fear in Draco's eyes was almost frightening. He locked them on Harry's. "Potter," he said with a shaky voice, "Don't make me beg you. I need that book or I'm throwing myself off the roof of the tower."

Harry cocked his head to one side and pretended to consider his choices carefully.

"I never meant to steal it in the first place! I stalled as long as I could. Tossing Weasley and Granger's flat was just for show. I knew it wasn't there. Granger brought hers here to Hogwarts."

"Could you throw yourself off someplace else? As much as I would enjoy that, it's kind of creepy."

"This is serious! I can't deal with the consequences of my choices, Potter! What, do you think? He'll retaliate by yelling at me or giving me the silent treatment? Think of the most horrible things you could ever imagine, triple it, and you might comprehend one percent of what I'm trying to tell you."

Harry's face turned serious. "Tell me, are you one of them?"

"Are you kidding? Voldemort's off his rockers. Besides, I live for myself. Not to better someone else."

Harry sighed. "You owe me big time."

Draco nearly collapsed with relief and gratitude.

* * *

With Roland locked in the room Sara once called her prison cell, Draco in the tower being watched over by Ron, Hermione and Dumbledore working on the new spell for the books, and Fawks on her way to Snape, Harry made his way through the cottage. He expected to hear the sounds of Elizabeth scrubbing something or running the vacuum, but there was only silence. He found her purse and a light spring jacket on the chair in the kitchen, but there was no sign of her.

"Liz?" He called out, "It's Harry!"

No answer.

Harry thought he would check the bedrooms, thinking maybe she had dozed off, which would irritate him to no end, but she wasn't there either. He went back to the kitchen to check for any new sign of Sara. There was none, but an old note he had placed in the drawer of a nightstand was open on the table. It was the one that gave the password for the cave entrance.

He found he wanted to run straight to the secret hatch under the almost finished house, but thought he would check on something first. He found the nearest telephone and dialed Brad Silverman's law office in London.

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"It's Harry Potter, sir, how are you?"

"I'm fine, Harry. And yourself?"

"Well, I just had a question. What agency is Elizabeth from? The housekeeper."

"Your Ministry arranged for her if I remember right. I thought it best to get someone who wouldn't ask questions about things one might find in your house if you get my meaning."

"Of course. That's all I needed to know, thank you Brad. And if you happen to speak to Sara, please tell her I miss her."

"Will do."

Harry hung up and made his way to the hatch, trying not to run.

The stench hit him as he neared the labyrinth and he covered his nose with his shirt and grimaced in disgust. It was horrible and as he made his way through the tricky maze of solid stone walls it only got worse. He found her in only a few minutes and turned away from the corpse, propped against the wall and with at least a week of decay. He quickly recovered his senses, holding the shirt tight over his

nose, he turned back to look at her and saw the message she had scrawled on the wall beside her.

He said he'd kill my grandchildren

I'm sorry

He ran on through the maze, knowing she'd gotten lost in one of his more clever traps before she'd ever gotten to the book, or else she'd have been locked behind a ward outside the door to the room in which it was kept.

Harry spoke the password and removed several wards and curses before he entered the room with the key he kept around his neck. He found the book alone on a table in the emptiness and tucked it into his robe before hurrying back to Elizabeth. He couldn't just leave her here. He would have to conjure a stretcher and bring her to Hogwarts for transfer to the Ministry. And for them, some alterations would have to be made to the story of what had befallen her. They couldn't tell the half corrupt Ministry about the books.

* * *

Snape arrived twenty minutes after the new books came by owl. Ron, who was glad to have his book back, was put in charge of the copying effort. Dumbledore was working Sara's tuft of black hair into a shape like a wizard's hat and Snape was off mixing a potion with her blood. Hermione was still working out the new spell, and Harry was alone with Draco.

Harry had taken Malfoy to a comfortable room close to Dumbledore's office where parents or visiting officials often waited. Elizabeth had been placed in a room off the infirmary and Harry was saddened and angered by her meaningless death. All over some books a few seventh year students had made and Roland's son gone for nearly two years now on account of them.

At first he'd been outraged at Malfoy for associating with someone who would force an innocent old housekeeper into doing such a thing, but when he saw Draco's exasperation he backed off. Emotions weren't easily read on Draco, but Harry knew what to look for.

Harry locked him in with a half-empty bottle of Finnegan's Swill and a small, but friendly smile. He felt bad for giving Draco a hard time. He found he was glad to see him again.

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He found Snape returned and Dumbledore's cone of black hair glowed with a golden light as it sat forgotten on the table. Hermione's books, he saw, were all closed and piled up, pushed aside. Quills still scribbled like mad as Ron announced the copies were nearly ready and Harry took a nervous step toward the pensive. His fingers touched the brass of its cover. He wasn't sure if he was ready to face Sara. Even in a memory.

Hermione's voice was unusually gentle. "Harry, you still have to touch your book. We're ready as soon as you do."

Inside the pensive was the same as outside. It was the small table in Dumbledore's office and Sara stood at one end of it. Smiling in her purple dress robe, a matching witch hat askew on her head. She had taken care not to include anyone else in her memory, so there were no doubles of them standing around the table. Smart on her part. No one ever thought of it, but it could all backfire if the books became confused with another spell being cast right next to them. The Orb was in the center of the table, though they couldn't use a memory of it and wouldn't even if they could. They had no need of such power. No, this time they would be concealing a magical gateway to Majorca.

Harry was rooted to the spot, staring at Sara's image. Her hair as she remembered it was much more blond than it actually had been and he wondered if it was a sign. Good or bad, he didn't know.

"Hurry up, Harry! We'll have to start over!"

Harry quickly took his place at the table, noticing Dumbledore had placed the glowing, cone-shaped nest of hair on top of "Sara's" book and Snape dumped a small jar of red-silver, shimmering potion into it. It spun on its tip over the sign of the Elemental, having appeared with the addition of Snape's strange liquid. They placed their wands on the books.

They annunciated the spell as they had before, beginning with Hermione, then Harry, and there was a long pause before Sara spoke, her phantom hand on the solid book, the hair and potion spinning through the middle of it as if she was no more than vapor and Harry faltered at the sound of her voice. He hadn't heard it since he'd found himself in Draco's pensive a year and a half before and hearing it now awakened feelings he'd buried over time, wounds he thought had almost healed.

As soon as Ron was finished speaking, light shot forth as it had before, tying the four books together in a brilliant rainbow of color. They uttered the new passwords, then Sara spoke and they all quickly joined her, for the gateway spell was supposed to be in unison and they fell neatly into rhythm.

McGonegall was absent, but it really didn't matter, so Dumbledore and Snape stepped forward and drew their wands.

"Unitus!"

All stood back as the pages fanned, then slammed shut. A moment later Harry's book reopened and he smiled as it did as he'd hoped, showing the location of the other duplicate books. The answer to each was the same. "Pensieve."

They had barely gathered them up as Sara began to fade and Harry stared at her as long as he could.

"Goodbye, Sara." He whispered, and suddenly felt a hand on his arm and they were back in Dumbledore's office.

He found he couldn't look at anyone, so Harry set to writing the new passwords on a small sheet of paper, which he stuck in between the pages of his book. This he handed to Dumbledore without an upward glance, then took Ron's book and left the room.

Draco was lounging on a high velvet couch, one leg on the floor, the other slung over the cushions.

His hand held the small bottle of Swill, resting it against his chest. His free arm was draped over his eyes.

"Potter, the Mark has come to the surface. I'm being called, you know. Please tell me you have the book."

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He knew better than to tell Draco it was a placebo. If Draco knew, Voldemort would get it out of him.

"I'm only giving this to you so that you'll remember something important, Malfoy."

Draco peeked out from under his arm, "And what would that be? That you think I'm the greatest guy in the world and can't live without me?" Draco gave a welcome smile.

Harry chuckled. "That you have to do the right thing when the time comes."

"I'll do my best, Potter."

Harry handed him the book. "Why is he after it anyway? Why didn't he just make a port-key or something? I don't get it."

"Do you think he explains himself to me? I don't know his reasons any better than you do."

"Well, I can't see him wanting to read our ideas or the spells we learned at Hogwarts and got out of books that could be found in any library. He must be after the gateway, I just don't understand why."

"Sorry, I can't help you."

"It wasn't easy to get you know. Sara still refuses to come home."

"Why didn't you just give me yours?"

"Funny you should ask. It came up missing today. I had Hermione's, but my housekeeper died trying to find it. I want to know why before I give it up. I had to give you Ron's."

Draco climbed onto his feet, "Thanks, Potter. I guess I owe you one."

"Remember what I told you."

"I will. 'Till we meet again?"

"Goodbye, Malfoy. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"I'd die of boredom. Goodbye, Potter."

Malfoy smiled and passed into the hallway. Harry smiled back, but it fell from his face as he watched Draco leave, wishing there was something he could do.

* * *

Dearest Harry,

I haven't written much since I arrived in Romania last year. First I told myself it was because it was too painful to think of you so much and so honestly, to uncover and examine my innermost feelings as I poured my soul onto the pages. Then it was because I was too busy focusing on my lessons with Vanya, which she gives via the Orb in the form of a mental connection. Then Snape asked me to return to Hogwarts today and everything came flooding back. Over the time that has passed I grew numb inside, stopped feeling so strongly, like I was just drifting through my days, existing and nothing more. I nearly collapsed I think, from the simple pain of remembering you and knowing that you're still waiting, even after nearly two years.

He gave me a choice, go back or send him with blood and hair for an urgent spell. Create a pensieve. You know what I chose, as hard as it was, but then it wasn't at all. I'm not ready to go home. There was no choice to make, really. Just a painful realization.

Snape says people have tried to set you up on dates and that you hide in the tower for days afterward, alone and bitter. He said you ran into Cho Chang in Diagon Alley last summer and had lunch with her, but when she asked to see you again you politely declined, then didn't show up for meals for three days. I worry about you, Harry. And you can't imagine the guilt I feel when I think of how much I have hurt you.

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There have been many times when I thought I should return the ring to you, free you from this promise we made in love and ignorance. Not because I no longer love you, I love you more with every passing moment, but because it isn't fair to hold you to it. I have been gone longer than I ever thought possible and the thought of trying to fit back into my old life seems unachievable. You seem like part of some wonderful dream I'd had long ago, and all that's left is the misery that holds tight to me. Shields me from happiness. A part of me has died, shriveled and turned black. I can't explain it, but there is a shadow over my heart and nothing can chase it away.

To add to this, it is said that Vanya's health is fading fast. She sleeps most of the time and we have to keep our exchanges short, for they sap her energy. I really only talk to her anyway, tell her not to be afraid, that I love her and that seems to help. She's already taught me everything I need to know and now I fear the day she slips away. I don't think she'll make it to my 20th birthday. The legend isn't exact, anyway, just an approximation. It could happen any time.

I don't know why I keep the ring. I don't know why I haven't written to you, telling you of my plans to stay on in Romania. My Grandmother left her house to me, which is where Vanya now lives, and I could picture myself here forever, surrounded by people who understand me completely, growing old all alone, causing no one any pain. Just existing without emotion until the day I fall away.

Love Forever, Sara

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25. My Immortal Beloved

"Well? What do you want? I was in the middle of something, you know!" Draco sat in a hard leather chair across from a set of frightening reddish eyes, glaring out at him from beneath the hood of a cloak. He reclined casually, as if the Dark Lord had just interrupted his dinner.

Voldemort showed no sign of amusement and scowled at Draco's disrespect. "You've had that book

for many hours."

"Well it took some time to get it back! Or didn't your *spies* tell you that? I assumed you knew I went to Hogwarts." He brushed back his long hair and let it spill down around his shoulders.

"I grow tired of your pride, Draco. I can make you just as loyal and compliant as your father was, though I do not think you'll enjoy it."

"Is that all you want? Some idiot savant? Well then you'd better look elsewhere. I'm not changing my very *personality*, not for you, my father, or anyone else. I got you the book, didn't I?"

"Yes, but you *lost* it. By your own admission. That's failure in my eyes."

"Yeah, but I got it back. I'd call that a success. Next time have me steal something from the girl's dorms during shower time. I want to keep my rating high."

"Do you expect me to believe you managed to steal this book from the school, with Dumbledore *and* Potter there to stop you?" Voldemort raised his wand. "*Veritas.*"

Draco felt his mind open up as if what guarded it had been suddenly ripped aside.

"Draco, what did you do at Hogwarts?"

"I went to see Harry Potter."

"And he gave you the book?"

"Yes. He said someone died trying to find Granger's and he wanted to know why. His has gone missing. That's why it took so long. He had to get that book back from Sara. He said Snape was bringing it."

"Why give it to you at all?"

"Because I was afraid of what you would do to me if I lost it. Harry's a good Samaritan. And supremely sentimental. I knew I could draw on his sympathy. After all, he *is* rather fond of saving people."

"Is he a *friend* of yours?"

"We associate."

"How do you think your *father* would feel about that?"

Draco's brow creased in annoyance at the mention of Lucius. "I don't really *care* what my father would think. After all, we did attend the *same school* for seven years. You tend to run into people now and again."

Voldemort seethed. "You're too stubborn for your own good, Draco. Perhaps you need a few more lessons in *obedience* and *respect*."

"I'll do as I'm told. I'll keep up appearances. I'll even answer your questions. But don't ask me to respect you. Respect has to be earned and in my eyes you're worse than my father."

"But you *loved* your father."

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"When I was younger I worshipped him. There was *no one* like him. People *listened* to him. They feared him, cowered in his presence. They *respected* his power over them, even his enemies. I wanted to be just like him." Draco leveled his eyes on Voldemort. "Then I met someone who opened my eyes to the truth of it all. The secret of life you could say. Creating fear is easy. Any *Hufflepuff* could learn to be cunning and uncaring. The real challenge is in making people love you. It's a fine and difficult art in which the real power lies. It's something my father failed at abysmally. I love him because he was my father, I hate him for the father that he was."

"The words of the weak, Draco. Love itself is weakness. Love is the only way out for those without the strength to endure. Those who lack ambition."

"Allow me to point out the flaws in that particular bit of nonsense."

"Silence!" Voldemort stood and took a few steps toward Draco's chair, his wand held out before him.

"My patience with you is wearing thin."

Draco recoiled the slightest bit. "You wanted honesty."

"I want *answers*, Mr. Malfoy." Voldemort lowered his wand. "Did Potter say anything about the book? Did he give you the password?"

"Of course not! He's not *stupid*, naive maybe, but he knew you wouldn't be able to open it. He couldn't understand why you would want it to begin with."

"What did you tell him?"

"I said I didn't know and I don't."

"Very well, then. How did you lose the book?"

"Polyjuice potion. Two of your wizards came to the door, claiming to have been sent by you to retrieve it. I handed it to her. To Sara Lemke."

"The Elemental herself came after it?"

"Yes. I recognized her just before she made off with it." His eyes became pained with the memory of her words.

Voldemort considered this for a moment. "She has been a thorn in my side for far too long." He raised his wand again, "*Finite veritas.*"

"That was wholly unnecessary! *How rude!*" Draco yelled, "Besides, I didn't tell you anything other than what I would have said *without* the curse! I may be a lot of things, but I'm not a liar!"

"Go home, Draco. It seems I have a swordsman to visit."

"Thank you." Draco said and suddenly found himself standing in the grass on top of a hill, overlooking London. He turned to find his house right behind him.

Draco sprawled out on the cool blanket of green and stared up at the stars, again getting the sensation of being two places at once. He thought of the bed on the roof of the tower. A smooth glass of

Finnegan's Swill and the Moonlight Sonata, drifting from the player, blending peacefully with the still of the night.

* * *

*...thus he was, thus he died, thus he will live for all time... **

Sara cradled the pillow, occasionally dabbing at her eyes with a scratchy paper tissue as she lay in bed, watching a movie about Beethoven on the hotel's TV. She was crying for Vanya, whom she had come to love. She'd slipped into a deep coma the night Sara had recovered the book from Draco, one she wasn't to return from, having drifted beyond even Sara's reach. A week later she died. That was 2 days ago. The funeral had been this morning.

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Sara found she could no longer stay in Vanya's little fieldstone house. She no longer wanted Romania or the cold mountains to surround her. She had sent Greg home to England, knowing she wasn't going back and thinking it unfair to take up any more of his life. He hadn't seen his friends and family in two years and she wanted to be alone anyway. Standing beside Vanya's grave in the rain, Sara realized she had never been truly alone in her life.

The moment she'd foreseen so long ago had come to pass as Sara put Mr. Sanders on a train earlier in the evening. She'd smiled as they stood on the platform. She had taken his hand and thanked him for all his help. He hugged her and kissed her cheek, promising to see her soon, but she got the feeling as he walked away that she would never see him again.

She ordered room service, knowing there was no one in the room across the hall to bring her dinner. No one to share a table with in a nearby cafe. The thought was a little frightening, though she felt solace and a kind of liberation in her loneliness. It was how misery *should* be.

The movie held her interest, kept her mind off Vanya and everything else that had clogged her thoughts today. She sipped her soda, curled up on her side and propped on three fluffy pillows. It was unexpected, the way the words of a movie letter stirred her deepest emotions. She was caught off guard, staring at the TV when the sentiments grabbed her attention and tore at her heart.

Why this deep sorrow? If we could be united, we would feel this pain no longer. Where I am, you are with me, too. Soon we will live together, and what a life it will be! I have to see you. However much you love me, I love you more. Never hide yourself from me...

*While still in my bed, my thoughts turn to you, my immortal beloved. Some of them happy, some sad, waiting to see whether fate will hear us. I can live only completely with you, or not at all. Yes. It must be.**

Sara closed her eyes and tears burned her face, the feelings she tried so hard to ignore bubbling to the surface and she wrapped a trembling hand around the diamond ring on her finger. Slowly, she took it off.

* * *

Harry sat in his office, having just finished grading his final exams. All of his students had passed, with the exception of a few Slytherins. It pleased him to know the three who gave him so much trouble would be spending summer holiday taking classes at the Ministry. From what he understood, they had failed Transfiguration and Herbology as well.

With it's pot, the snapdragon was now taller than he was and it bit him every time he tried to water it. He could always levitate the can over to the plant, but it had become a bit of a challenge and he stood up to face it now. It had become even more vicious now that there was a little pink seedling blooming no more than a foot tall in the pot as well, but Professor Sprout insisted it had to grow a little more before it could be transplanted.

"Are you going to bite me?" He asked it, standing no more than a meter from it's big purple flower, water can in hand. The snapdragon seemed to be staring him down. They had a little stand-off that lasted just a few moments, then it spit a blast of pollen in his face and Harry sneezed at least six or seven times before using a spell Hermione had sent him to remove the sticky power.

"That's it!" Harry pointed his wand and was just about to curse it when there was a flash of purple and the snapdragon bit his hair, pulling until Harry was nearly lifted off his feet. In his surprise, he dropped his wand. "Let go of me you big ugly weed!" He yelled as the flower tossed him around. He swiped a hand at it and missed, only to get the hard smack of it's leaf across his face. "I'm having you turned into *COMPOST!!*"

Harry drove his fist into the 'jaw' of the bloom and suddenly found himself dropped to the floor.

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Harry kept a large pair of garden shears in the closet for occasions like these and he summoned them now, glaring up at the looming flower. "*Accio scissors.*"

The snapdragon recoiled in fear, wrapping a lower leaf protectively around the seedling. "That's right!" Harry smirked as his eyes narrowed, "Where's your pollen *now?*"

"Harry." Dumbledore chuckled from the doorway, "It seems flowers are the one threat we never covered and should have."

Harry, yellowish hair standing straight up, turned as the Headmaster entered, Snape looking grave and carrying a newspaper, leaned against the wall just inside. Dumbledore took the can and approached the plant.

"Sir! It's not friendly!"

"Don't worry, Harry. They appreciate a light touch is all." Dumbledore stroked it's purple chin, bruised from where Harry had punched it, and dumped the water on the soil. "Such a beautiful shade of lavender, you are. And your little friend here is coming along nicely." He bent to touch the head of the tiny pink bloom. With Dumbledore's attention diverted, the larger snapdragon leaned forward and

blew a cloud of pollen at Harry. He sneered with menace as he tried to fan it away. He was now mostly yellow.

Dumbledore leaned on his walking stick and gave Harry a hand up. His expression had turned serious. "Harry, Severus has some news that might be of interest to you, although I have to warn you. It's troubling indeed."

At the mention of his name, Snape came forward, unfolded the muggle paper and pointed out a small article. Harry saw it was *The Sun* out of London. He read in silence, his smile fading with each word.

"Mr. Sanders." He said, incredulous. "He's dead!"

"Yes." Snape answered. "It looks like the work of Death eaters if you ask me. Killed on a train headed for France with no witnesses and his wallet intact. No obvious cause of death. Perhaps they thought he was carrying Sara's spell book."

"He was returning to England? Why didn't Sara protect him? I don't understand!"

"I don't think she was with him. I would love to ask her myself, but I don't know where to find her. I went to Romania right away, but she had told them nothing. The elderly Elemental has died and Sara is nowhere to be found."

"They killed the her, too?"

"No, Potter. She was 120 years old. She died two days ago. Sara attended the funeral this morning."

"Find the rain and you'll find Sara."

"Not quite. Sara has learned to control her emotions. It may be raining, but there will be no hurricanes to follow. No sudden storms."

Harry turned to Dumbledore. "Send Fawks with a letter. She may not even know about Mr. Sanders!" Dumbledore nodded, his expression troubled. "That's true, Harry, but I don't think writing to her will do any good. She returns all my letters."

"Mine, too." Harry sighed. Then he looked to Snape. "She doesn't return *yours*."

* * *

Sara had ordered a bottle of wine with her dinner, then requested another and both were currently empty on the floor. Merlot stained the carpet from an overturned glass. The floor of the balcony was littered with cigarette butts, even though she had given up what little smoking she'd done long ago. Sara herself lay on the bed, still wearing her funeral clothes, black mascara smudges lined her eyes. Her vision was blurred.

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The doors were open to the night, the TV dark and silent as she hummed the Moonlight Sonata, the few blond strands in her hair gone black. There was no light in the room, only what spilled in from outside and the open air called to her, brought her to her feet and onto the balcony.

The blinking cityscape swam in and out of focus as the traffic roared beneath her and Sara sat on the rail, clinging to the post and pulled her legs up and over. Tears spilled down her face at the mere thought of him. "Harry," she said, "I'm so sorry."

If she let go of the post, she would fall.

She held on fast, though she longed to feel the peace it would bring. The serenity.

Sara stood there on the edge, thinking of Draco, whom she still loved and missed. The guilt she felt for what she had done to him ate away at the fabric of her being, the way the thought of Harry ate away at her soul. She thought of Lucius, his parting words to her, and the mark she still bore. He must have understood her well. A black widow she was. *Belladonna* she was also. Poison to all who got too close.

Nikita...

I hear you. She replied, You have found me at a strange moment in time.

Your soul is troubled tonight, my dear.

No, Nikolae. My soul is dead.

Invite me in. Talk with me for awhile.

She sat on the floor of the balcony, looking out through the wrought iron bars, too listless to move.

The vampire lifted her effortlessly and carried her to the bed. Gently, he lowered her to the pillows, then pulled up a chair and sat close to her. He smoothed her hair, black and brittle and *long*, like a shroud, ever more so than it had been only one night ago. He thought it probably touched the floor. "It is a shroud." She told him, her voice a whisper, "Only it's supposed to be myth. I cut it off, but it grew back within hours."

"What does it mean?"

"It doesn't mean anything."

"My dear, you have come too far to give up this way. You fought for what you wanted, you sacrificed everything dear to you, only to succumb to the hardship when it's all in your grasp. Has your journey made you lose sight of it's own purpose?"

"I set out on a desperate quest for strength of will and understanding, Nikolae. I left a path of destruction, but you're right, I got what I wanted. Only now I understand all too well and the experience has changed me, taken from me my very spirit. Decimated my ability to feel happiness. I'm dead inside. My only true accomplishment was in destroying myself."

"You think you've changed so much that the ones you left behind would no longer love the person you've become?"

"Yes. Something like that."

The vampire cast his pained eyes to the floor, then looked at her again. "The rest of your life hinges on this moment, Nikita. And you have already played your hand, I see."

"I did what was right. What was fair. Do you know how I affect people? I am a burden to every person I know. My parents died because of me. I killed Malfoy's father and his mind grows darker by the day. Draco was so kind to me, Nikolae. All he ever did was love me."

"And he still does. I could see it in his eyes when you spoke your parting words. What's done is done, you can't change that, but there's one you love above all, one whose fate you hold in your hands. That situation is easily remedied, dear girl. He is not lost to you."

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"I am lost to *him*." Sara sniffled, starting to cry again, "There is no one alive who understands, save one. I doubt Harry even understands."

"How could he unless you told him? Have you ever sat down and confessed to him all the things you have told me?"

"I can't, don't you see? I could never bring him down that far, to suffer the burden of my dysfunctions and insecurities. To feel the blackness as I do. Harry shines from within. He belongs in the light."

"So do you, Nikita. You are one of God's angels, sent to grace us all with your very presence." He gently raised her chin, "You... are... *beautiful*, my friend."

* * *

Harry was getting killed in a game of chess. The third he'd played with Dumbledore and probably the last. Tomorrow's classes, the last of the semester, had been cancelled in favor of a fun day of competitions, such as doubles Quick-Quidditch, friendly dueling, lots of other stuff, even a regular old talent contest. It was all being run by Prefects, which Harry was thankful for. He wasn't put in charge of any of it. He would have the whole day to do as he pleased.

"I received word from Roland today. I almost forgot to mention it."

"What did he have to say?"

"Only that his son had returned home, but that the boy was not adjusting well. I suggested he send him to Hogwarts with the next batch of students. There's no harm in him starting a year early."

"I can only wonder what he learned after two years with Voldemort. However, it does tell us that he accepted the book."

"Thank Merlin." Dumbledore sighed and moved his queen. "Checkmate. I think that's Severus coming up the stairs."

"I don't hear anything."

"You will."

Harry listened harder. "I hear *wings*."

Both heads turned toward the open doors to the roof just as a huge macaw flew through them, a letter held in its talons. "*Topenga!*" Harry yelled and jumped to his feet. Dumbledore leaned forward with interest.

She dropped the envelope and right away Harry knew something was wrong. For the first time, Sara had addressed it to *him*. He wanted it to say "*Captain*." There was something inside, lumpy and rolling around in one corner, so he sat down and opened it.

He dumped out a single sheet of hotel stationary and his diamond ring.

Dumbledore watched as Harry fell back in his chair, his hands dropping limp to his sides, unreadable eyes glued to the glittering item before him. Harry did and said nothing for a long moment, just stared at it. "Harry," he whispered, "What does the letter say."

Harry spoke through his shock. "I...I don't know."

Dumbledore lifted the sheet, then placed it open on the table so Harry could read it, too and slid it in front of him. The hand was so shaky it was nearly illegible, but the two words didn't take much to decipher.

I'm sorry

"Sir," Harry managed, "I want to be alone."

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"Of course." Dumbledore sighed as he stood, he went to say something else, give him some bit of wisdom to help him through, but came up empty. He turned and left the room, Snape having just opened the door to let himself in. "Come Severus. Leave Harry to his letter."

Snape stared at the table, saw what Harry's eyes were trained on. Tears slid silently down Harry's face and Snape bowed his head respectfully, closing the door quietly behind him.

* * *

Harry had no idea how much time had passed. He didn't care. He had been numb for so long, unable to move from his chair, or even bring himself to touch the ring. He couldn't tear his eyes away from it, either. He didn't know what to feel, or how to deal with what was before him. He didn't understand. How could it end this way? After all this time of waiting and anticipation, all the worry and the anger and the love he still felt for her. And to send only *two words*. No long letter of explanation. No assurances, nothing. His eyes landed on the note and he picked it up, brushing his thumb over the scribbled apology. His heart ached, not knowing what he had done wrong, why she had come to this decision. He read the heading on the stationary. She was at a hotel in Russia and he thought briefly of apparating there, but knew she would already be gone. Why else would she leave such a clue? Or maybe she wanted him to look for her. Maybe she was finding it hard to come home.

Harry stood and pulled the gold box from his pocket, stopping first to attach the diamond to the chain that held his Amuridon, which still swirled scarlet, still radiated warmth and assurance. Confused, he touched the key and went directly to the phone in the kitchen.

His hopes were so high it frightened him. He knew how he might come crashing down if the answer

was not what he wanted to hear, and his fear was valid. The clerk at the hotel said Sara had not been a recent guest. She must have had the stationary from a visit long past and used it now to turn her back on him.

He wondered why, but an anger welled in him he could barely control. He had an intense desire to smash everything. He wanted to tear the walls down, break the windows and set the cottage on fire. He wouldn't, though. Harry knew if he harmed a single thing in this place he would regret it. He loved Sara, and couldn't grasp the idea that he might never see her again. That it was over just would not sink in. It wasn't possible.

For the first time in a year and a half, Harry got out a bottle of Swill, pulled the cork, and did his best to drink himself into oblivion, collapsing against the back of the sofa. He drank too quickly, swallowing Seamus' rum in gulps instead of sips and it was less than an hour before he felt the numbness return and with it a desperation the likes of which he had never felt. It was like she had died, gone to a place unreachable on all levels and lost to him forever.

Carrying the bottle, Harry went to the kitchen and found Elizabeth's caddy of cleaning supplies under the sink and took out a bottle of glass polish and some paper towels. The anguish he felt as he misted the mirror tore at him and he nearly cried again as he smudged the hearts they had drawn there two years ago, then wiped them away. The gesture held some note of finality, that by doing this he had accepted her refusal, but the anger in his heart needed an end to this unrelenting, drawn out drama he had lived for so long. At last he turned away, unable and unwilling to look at his own reflection. Finally, he left the bottle and went out. There was one thing he had to do, one thing that felt right above any other and he made his way to the big house, situated down a flower-lined path through the trees that connected it to the cottage. There was a fountain and a wading pool in the front yard, but Harry barely acknowledged this as he came onto the step and let himself in.

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Slowly he wandered through the replica of his fencing room, imagining a warm and festive gathering of friends as he made his way up the center of the pillars. He could almost see people dancing, tables heaped with food and drinks. Seamus and Neville playing drinking games in the corner, laughing and joking loudly with other Hogwarts alumni. He saw Dumbledore and McGonagall off to one side, having a pleasant conversation with Snape and Madam Hooch. Finely dressed Ministry officials and their wives mingled and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley talked with the Grangers. Ron and Hermione smiled as they danced past him and there was Sara near the hallway arch, speaking with Draco, glasses of champagne in their hands. She turned toward him and smiled as he approached, then faded away. Room after room brought visions of what might have been. What his life *should* have had in store. He imagined having dinner with Sara in the empty dining room, telling each other about their day as they ate and sipped glasses of French wine. Relaxing together before the fire in the sitting room. Playing endless games of exploding snap at the kitchen table. Splashing around in the pool, having a tea in the solarium.

Finally, he made his way to the courtyard and admired it's beauty as he found a bench and dropped onto it. The many lilacs were in full bloom and the moonlight roses glowed gossamer as did the marble statue that graced the center fountain. It was Frodo Baggins she'd chosen, bearer of a heavy burden, nearly enslaved by it, dragged down by it, but never *defeated* by it. The tears came again, but he didn't wipe them away. He could feel only the totality of her loss as he sat in solitude in the middle of his forsaken paradise, his mind on days long passed.

Everything in his life, it seemed, brought about her memory. The wind, the rain, the castle where he spent his days, the rooms where he spent his nights. London, Diagon Alley, Hogsmead... All held some memory of Sara. Even to look upon his friends was painful as she had been their friend, too. He felt cheated and betrayed, and as he touched the ring around his neck, he thought of Frodo Baggins and what had become of *his* ring, and what a relief it was when he tossed it into the fires from whence it came. Difficult as it was to part with it.

It was with this thought that Harry left the courtyard, left the silent statue of Frodo and the lilacs he'd planted for Sara, the violets and the moonlight roses that would forever remind him of her, and found the room where the contractors had left their excess supplies. He quickly located a can of paint that would suffice and carried this and a large brush to the main entrance of the house and set it on the step. Harry felt nothing as he painted the doors in the dark. Black, to mark the death of his life with Sara, to match the mood of his soul. To identify this place as a tomb where all his hopes and dreams had perished. A place he would never return to as long as he lived.

* * *

On top of the box that contained his journal, Harry taped a short letter for Sara, open so she had to read it. The ring he had placed in a velvet pouch to be tied to Topenga's leg, who he was surprised to find still in the tower. Perhaps Sara expected a reply.

Sara,

Do I not deserve some sort of explanation? Did you really think you could send me this lame apology and I would just shrug and go about my life? Have you forgotten that I have been waiting patiently for you to come home all this time, waiting to start the life I thought I would have one day? I've been waiting blindly, foolishly it seems, never knowing how you are, wondering about you constantly. I love you so much, but you won't even write! You have no idea what you have done to me today. Did you think I would just get over it, find someone else? I could never, unless I gave them my heart in pieces. Besides, if this is what love is like, I never want to feel it again.

I do not want this ring. I refuse to be the bearer of your broken promises, having to be the one to look at it, to feel the pain of it's presence. Keep it. Every time you see it, remember what you did to me and

know that I suffer still.

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As for me, I guess I'll just go on waiting, hoping you'll change your mind. I love you, Sara. I can only hope you put it back on your finger.

Harry

Topenga took the package, then dropped it. Harry thought it odd that Topenga would refuse to carry his mail and wondered what instructions she had been given. "Hedwig," Harry turned toward the cage, "come here. I have a job for you." Hedwig landed next to Sara's bird and lifted her leg so he could attach the pouch that held the ring.

Topenga cocked her head at the owl. "Hello Hedwig!" She said, squawked, then repeated. "Hello Hedwig!" Hedwig hooted in reply.

Harry watched as she jumped onto the box and wrapped her talons around the string that held it. With a flutter of wings, she was gone.

Harry looked at the parrot. "She'll get it whether she likes it or not."

Topenga flew onto his shoulder and pushed her head against his cheek.

* * *

Harry did not leave the tower the next day. He awoke with a hangover he wouldn't bother to medicate, and an understanding that he had been freed of the ties he held most dear. He could love no one except Sara. He wanted to see her, but didn't know where to look. Snape's letter had come back to him, even his owl unable to find her.

He'd spent the entire day considering what could possibly push Sara to this point, came up with nothing probable, and realized it was beyond his comprehension. Either she was past her limits, ever so much more than she had been two years ago, or there was some truth to Snape's lies. This he could not even fathom, and the other was too difficult and heart-wrenching to contemplate. He felt he should not be angry with her, but yet he was. He felt decimated, all life gone from his limbs, and he walked around in a daze most of the time, unable to focus on any one thing, his thoughts returning quickly to Sara.

He played the Moonlight Sonata often, standing on the roof in his pajamas and barefoot, sipping Finnegan's Swill and watching the competitions play out below him and at the Quidditch Pitch in the distance. Once in awhile he made a cup of tea and ate the salad and soup that had come with Winky, lost and indifferent.

He didn't go down to dinner and ignored what was sent up for him. He took her pictures down, only to find the empty spaces more disturbing and soon put them back up. It was hard to look at her, but not seeing her face in these rooms was even harder to deal with and Harry stood now before the Criterion photo, remembering one of the best days of his life.

He missed her. The very thought of her brought him physical pain. What had sustained him to this point was the knowledge that she was coming back to him someday. That what he waited for was the only thing that would make him truly happy. Now that the promise was broken there was nothing left to hold onto. She was gone, lost to him and he had to go on without her.

Harry found himself crying again and quickly turned his eyes from the picture, collapsing moments later into the bed on the roof. Thinking of Sara, he drifted off, her pillow in his arms.

* * *

He should have gone down to breakfast to bid farewell to the graduating seventh years since he didn't attend the ceremony or the end-of-year feast, but Harry slept through it, waking up just in time for lunch. He laid in bed as he picked at the tray he was brought, then pushed it away and tried for hours to sleep. It was impossible.

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This was the day that marked Sara's departure two years before. It was also a year ago that he had choked Snape in her defense, wrapped in a silent rage. Then spent yet another restless night searching the skies for any sign of her, thinking she would come home for some reason. He had no misconceptions this year, however. Sara had already told him this much and he was sick over it, and furious with her. He'd once said he would forgive her anything, but she hadn't believed him as they'd sat on the new sofa in the cottage, as she'd tried to warn him. The truth of it was that he *would* forgive her anything. Anything at all. Even this.

He wondered if she'd received his journal and the letter. Snape's owl being unsuccessful was worrisome, but Harry had faith in Hedwig. He thought if there was one bird in a million that could find Sara, she was the one. He wished the letter hadn't been so angry. He was sorry he'd sent it now, in the light of day and with a much clearer head, but would it really hurt for her to see the way he really felt? It was a side he had never really shown her, but was this the time? He thought if he didn't hear back from her soon, he would send something a little more heartfelt.

Stepping out of the shower, he used Hermione's comb on his long hair, flowing over his shoulders now and looking weirder than ever, but he found the length much easier to cope with. It didn't look as neat as he would like, but it had been a long time since he'd cared about his appearance. He used a quick drying spell before replacing his glasses and getting dressed.

The rain was coming and the air had cooled, so Harry put on his favorite outfit of jeans and the green sweater Sara had sent to replace the one he'd worn to death. He didn't really want to see anyone, especially Snape. He went down to dinner mostly so they wouldn't worry about him. He'd found out long ago that if he made brief appearances and kept to himself they would leave him alone when he returned to the tower in search of seclusion.

Silently he took his seat. He was dismayed to see the chairs had already been rearranged so they faced

each other, so they sat around it instead of along it. He much preferred to look out at the empty hall and was glad to see the chair across from him was empty, as was the one next to him at the head of the table. Dumbledore sat on his right with Minerva across from him and Snape sat next to her, talking with Hagrid. All fell quiet when Harry joined them. Dumbledore gently patted his arm and Harry tried to smile, but didn't quite manage.

Harry noticed Filch was not at the table and wondered what manner of problem would keep him from his dinner with no students left at the school. Harry wished Filch was here to sneer at him. It was better than dealing with the fact that everyone kept to their plates so they didn't have to catch his eyes. It seemed no one quite knew what to say. He decided he should eat quickly and return to his rooms. Of course, it had to be Snape who finally addressed him. "I wouldn't dwell on it, Potter. Some things are for the best." McGonagall, Dumbledore, and Hagrid looked at Snape as if he was mad. "It wasn't meant to be to begin with if you ask me. It's just too bad Sara had to wait so long to come to her senses."

Harry's wand was in his hand and pointed at Snape in a flash. "*SHUT-UP!!*" He yelled as a bolt of light leapt forward. Snape's lips melded together seamlessly and Harry went back to his dinner, dropping his wand beside his plate.

"Minerva," Dumbledore sighed, "Would you mind taking Severus to the hospital? Poppy is gone, but I'm sure she must have a counter-curse for 'shut-up'."

"Some things are better left unfixed, Albus. Let's all have our dessert first." She turned and frowned at Severus, "You deserved that."

Snape managed a grunting noise, pushed back his chair, and left the hall. Harry stared down at his plate, pushing the dessert around with his fork without much interest in eating it when Hedwig flew in and lit on the arm of the chair. She was minus the package, but the pouch was still tied to her leg. Harry removed it, his heart sinking lower than he thought possible, holding back the urge to cry in front of everyone. He slipped the pouch into his pocket as the front doors opened. Filch was a little late for dinner and Harry looked up, perhaps to see the sneer he had hoped for earlier. Only it wasn't Filch. It was two hooded figures, charming the rain from their clothes in the entrance.

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Harry stood quickly, his fork clattering to the plate, his chair toppling loudly to the floor behind him. His sudden movement drew everyone's attention, including the newcomers. The taller figure stood against the wall, hands clasped respectfully before him. The other ventured toward them between the tables, black cloak floating along the stone, its hood concealing the face, but recognition stunned Harry and his heart beat like a freight train in his chest.

She stopped near the end of the Ravenclaw and Gryffindor tables, a fine, manicured hand reaching up to undo the clasp of her cloak. In one trembling movement, she pushed back the hood and let it fall to the floor.

Everyone gasped.

"Sara." Harry whispered, walking on nervous legs to the edge of the rise and down the stairs, coming to a stop a few feet from her. His stomach fluttered, yet sat like lead. He didn't know what to do. Her hair was death, black as night, brittle and coarse, like a million little twigs that might snap off if touched. The ends swept the floor. Even her eyebrows were black and the change was positively frightening. Her skin was pale and lifeless. Harry held back the tears that threatened as he looked on her for the first time again. "*What happened to you?*"

"Harry." She sighed and tears coursed down her face as he grabbed her in a tight embrace, unable to wait for her answer. So long he had dreamt of this moment and the relief he found in her touch washed over him, the Amoridon glowing warm against his chest. She clung to him, crying softly on his shoulder. "*I made a terrible mistake.*"

The teachers watched as Sara's hair turned blond the moment his arms went around her and just the old black streak remained. The extra length broke off at her waist and drifted to the floor and she gently sobbed into his shoulder. Dumbledore smiled as he led them out, Hagrid and McGonagall sniffing quietly, but smiling just the same.

Sara felt surreal, like she was stuck in dream. She couldn't really be here with Harry, his arms around her, holding her close the way he used to. She melted against him, closed her eyes and kissed his neck, his face. It was strange to touch his hair, to feel the warmth of his skin against hers, to feel his heart pounding in his chest. He was the remedy for all that ailed her and she wondered how she could have gone another day without seeing his face. "Let me look at you." She smiled and stepped back, her eyes wet with tears. "Harry, I've missed you so much."

His voice was quiet and unsteady. "I've missed you, too."

"I like your hair." She gave a tearful smile, "I saw it in the Orb, but that was some time ago. Not even in my dreams was it as soft as this." She ran her fingers through it, letting her hand come to rest on his cheek.

"You're blond again, Sara." He brushed a few wisps from her face, "It's better this way. Not so hard to look at."

She lifted a lock of hair and smiled brightly, turning back to Harry with fresh tears in her eyes, her voice a whisper. "It's gone! My god, *it's gone!*" Sara threw herself into his arms and let her eyes fall closed as he kissed her, pulling her close again like a thousand sighs, remembering every moment she'd spent without him.

Harry felt his anger melt away, his fears drifted from his mind as two years of intense loneliness and misery culminated in this moment and were washed away by the touch of her hands, the feel of her

hair against his face, the familiar scent of her perfume. No one could know how it felt to be near her again. As the kiss fell away he held her, stroking her hair, his eyes closed to the room. He could sense only her, there was nothing else and he would have it no other way.

Finally, he pulled away, but only just enough to look at her. Tears stood in his eyes as she brushed a lock of hair behind his ear. "Why did you return the ring, Sara? I have to know."

"Not now, Harry. There's always later for darker things. I just want to be here with you now. I want to remember every single thing I love about you."

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He brushed away her tears, cradling her face in his hands. "What I need to know is," Harry pulled the pouch from his pocket and dumped it onto his palm. He held the ring in the dim light of the sconces, the fire reflecting brilliantly through the diamond and glinting amber off the polished gold. "will you return this to your finger?" He pulled her closer and let his head rest against her hair. "I'm asking you to marry me, Sara. Soon. No more waiting. No more having to guess at what tomorrow will bring. I don't want to live in fear, waking every morning, wondering if you'll still be there beside me."

"You don't know me anymore, Harry. I can only hope that you'll still love me when you see what I've become. I'm just a shell of your Sara, filled with shadows and anger. Desperation. And misery."

"I know *everything* about you. I feel your pain, your darkest days. And I forgive you all of it. All except *this*." He brought the ring between them. "To this I need an answer. *Will you keep your promise?*"

"My answer is always the same, Harry. I'll be your Mrs. Potter." She smiled through her tears, "How could I be anything else?"

Harry smiled as he swept her up in his arms, smiled for the first time in years it seemed, and he took her hand as he set her down. "Don't ever mail this to me again." He smiled as he slid the ring on her finger.

"I'd have to mail it from across the room." She smiled back, "I'm never leaving your side again."

You're going to be sick of me."

"Never." He took her hands in his, "Sara, there's something I want to show you."

"Not just yet, Harry."

It was only now that Harry remembered the second figure, the man who still stood silent sentry at the back of the room. His posture unchanged from when he'd first saw him.

Nikolae, Sara thought, *come meet my Harry*.

Nikolae wiped his eyes as he made his way to them, moving very quickly with barely an effort it seemed and without prompt. He slowed as he neared them and Harry took a few steps back, unfamiliar with the strange feeling of dread that came over him in the stranger's presence.

"Harry, don't fear him. Nikolae is a vampire, but you needn't be frightened. He won't harm you."

"Hello." Harry said tentatively.

"It is understanding you seek, Mr. Potter. Perhaps I can help you with that, if you'll allow it."

"Yes," Harry replied, "I want to know."

Sara stepped aside and the vampire approached Harry, who fought the natural desire to back away.

Harry turned to Sara. "I can show Nikolae to his room. You should go find Dumbledore. He's been worried sick about you."

"I'll see you in the tower, then." She hesitated, "Harry, I don't want to leave you."

He hugged her again and smoothed her hair. "Sara, I'm not going anywhere. Not without you. I mean that forever."

Dobby appeared as if on cue, took Sara's hand and led her out of the room. Harry felt a tug on his heart as he watched her walk away, wanting to follow. He turned back to the vampire.

"My touch may feel strange to you. Do not worry. I wouldn't harm one that my Nikita holds so dear. You above all."

"I'm glad to hear that." Harry tried to jest, but the proximity of the vampire had the hairs on his neck standing up. He longed for his wand, still on the table by his plate.

"You need no weapon. Close your eyes. I'll show you everything I know."

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Harry tried to relax and it became easier with the visions, flashing through his mind. Sara through a window, holding the lighthouse that adorned the cave, looking back with a questioning that challenged the vampire's courage. Sara standing under a tree after a storm, distrust in her eyes and anger in her words. His old Firebolt slicing the night air and the words "*I need your help!*" He saw images, knew the thoughts Nikolae had heard in Sara's mind. He felt the blackness Sara felt, the hopelessness. He saw through her eyes a hotel room, felt her apathy, her misery that delved deeper than any he had ever felt. He saw her climb over the rail on a balcony, felt the need for peace in her soul. Tears leaked from his eyes unnoticed.

There was a phantom voice in the memories, Nikolae's, and he came to Sara now over a long distance, sensing her darkness and bringing her back from the edge. Harry listened to their discussion, felt the struggle within her, the need to go home, her fear of the past, of the future.

"It was you." Harry said as the hands fell away and his eyes opened again. "You saved her. You convinced her to come home."

"She was lost." Nikolae reflected, "I only helped her find the path."

"You have my gratitude."

* * *

Sara entered the tower, looking around and found Harry waiting for her by the doors to the roof. He

held a moonlight rose the way he'd held a white one so long ago, when they were both different people.

"Here we are again." She said, "Look at this place. Nothing has changed."

"Everything changes." Harry smiled, "I just moved everything back to where it was when you left." She laughed and he gave her the rose. "Not everything, Harry. You're still thoughtful and sweet as ever."

Harry blushed a little. Her spirits had risen remarkably, due no doubt to her visit with Dumbledore and the others.

Her smile faded as she noticed two tiny marks on his neck. A drop of blood stained his collar. "What happened? You didn't have this earlier."

"Nikolae. He gave me all the memories he had of you. I wanted to share some of mine in return. It was the only way I could think of without emptying my head into the pensieve."

Sara looked horrified. "*He drank your blood?!*"

"With my permission. In fact, I had to talk him into it. Don't tell me he never drank yours?"

"It never occurred to me to offer."

"Now he has seen the happiness we once shared." His hand came to rest against her cheek, "His memories were *terrible*, Sara. I should have come after you a long time ago."

"Be glad you didn't. I never wanted you to see me that way. We'll be happy again, Harry. Now that I'm here and I've seen your face I'm sure of it. Things have a way of just melting away when I'm with you. Nothing else matters." Her smile was troubled, "That is, if you like the new me."

"Would you stop already? Sara, I would love you even if you were some deranged lunatic that ate human hearts for breakfast."

"Close, not a bad guess." She grinned and remembered the rose, "I'd better put this in some water."

"To hell with water. There's a million more where that came from. I'll stop giving you flowers, I think. You always leave to get a vase."

"Fine, no water, but I've been wearing these clothes forever. Let's change. We can sit by the fire and talk for awhile. I just...I need to be close to you."

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For some reason, Harry felt awkward at the thought of changing clothes in the same room with Sara.

He wasn't uncomfortable by any means, but she had just walked through the door an hour or so before after a long and difficult absence. He smiled as he took her hand and followed her to the dressing room anyway.

They turned their backs on one another as they went about dressing for bed, though Harry glanced over his shoulder and noticed a strange mark just below the small of her back. It looked like a spider and he couldn't help but ask.

"Sara? Did you get a tattoo?"

"Not by choice, if that's what you mean." she answered, her voice low, her eyes downcast. She pulled his old shirt on and turned around to face him while she buttoned it. He took over the task for her.

"Tell me about it?"

She sighed, unable to look in his eyes. "It was Lucius. He cursed me the black widow before he died."

"We'll find a way to get rid of it." Harry promised, lifting her chin to see her sad eyes. "It's in the past, Sara. Everything's new now. Different."

"Tell that to Draco."

"Sara. Draco is better off without his father. Yes, he's upset about it and that's understandable, but you did yourself and the rest of the world a favor. Why are you wearing this ratty thing?"

She regarded the grayish and fraying men's shirt she'd worn every night for the last two years and smiled. "Habit I guess." There was something troubling him, she saw, something he wouldn't ask.

"Harry, what are you thinking? Tell me what's on your mind."

"I don't want to offend you."

"Believe me, you can't."

"It's just something Snape told me last year. I didn't believe a word of it, but I guess I want to hear it from you." Harry fidgeted for a moment, then wrapped his arms around her waist. "He said you were seeing other people."

Sara smiled halfheartedly. "That's not true."

Harry breathed relief.

"There was only one. A Viennese pianist. I attended a recital and was taken in by him at once. There was something about him I couldn't place, something that drew me. I found myself wanting to spend time in his company and we had lunch a few times. Then finally dinner. After, he tried to kiss me and I turned my face away. It was then that I realized the source of my attraction."

"Which was?"

"He looked like you." She said, her voice breaking from holding back a flood of emotion. "I had never felt such guilt and shame. I left the city at once without explanation."

"I know what you mean about guilt and shame. There was a time when I thought I should move on with my life. I'd lost hope of ever seeing you again and I was desperately lonely. During that time there was someone there for me." he paused, finding it hard to explain himself, "Did you read my journal?"

"Yes. And I forgive you everything. Your words, Harry. They were so beautiful and full of pain. It kills me to think of your suffering. I wish there had been another way. I would never hurt you if I could help it."

"I know, Sara. I don't blame you. You did what you had to do and now it's over. Let's try to put the past behind us now. You're here and that's the only thing I care about." He hugged her to his chest, "*I love you. Stay with me tonight and every night thereafter. Never leave me again.*"

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"I won't, Harry. It's why I couldn't see you. I knew when I saw you again it would be forever. Or as long as you'll have me."

"Forever it is."

"Good. I couldn't bear to lose you again, Harry." His arms tightened around her and she gently kissed his neck. "Let's go to bed. To hell with the fire."

"It's been so long since I've felt your touch." Sara sighed as they lay entwined beneath the coverlet, her hands tangled in his hair, the old dress shirt discarded on the floor by his pajamas. His words were muffled as he kissed her face, her neck. "I thought about you all the time." he whispered, "I remember *everything* about you." He found her lips for a passionate kiss before drifting back down, his hands caressing her body, her skin like silk beneath him, trembling ever so slightly, her breath warm and captivating against his shoulder. "I missed you so much, Sara. I could never feel this way about anyone else. You are the essence of all that I love. You are my life."

"*I love you.*" Her hands slid down his back as her eyes fell closed, her every sense alive and electrified by the nearness of him. "I'll *always* love you."

He kissed her again and her breath came soft and uneven, the need to be closer nearly overwhelming as the passion grew between them, their hands drifting with desire and affection, their words lost in the sensation of each other...

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Book Four: Out of the Black

26. Home By the Sea

Don't peek." Harry smiled as he tied a silk scarf around Sara's eyes. It was hot in the cottage this time of year and he was anxious to get outside. When he was sure she couldn't see at all, he took her hand and led her into the bright morning sunshine.

Sara, her hair reflecting a golden halo of light, was barefoot as usual, and wearing a pretty white cotton sundress which Harry thought looked much more comfortable than his tee-shirt and denim shorts. He was sweating from being inside and wished he'd thought to come earlier and turn on the A/C as he led her down the path to the house. The sweet scent of roses and a mingling of other flowers perfumed the air, stirred by salty breezes drifting in from the Channel.

Harry stopped where the path left the trees and opened onto the house's front lawn with the drive off to the left and, holding his breath, he removed the blindfold.

Sara gasped, her eyes wide in amazement. "Oh my god!" She whispered, "Am I dreaming Harry?"

"No, not dreaming."

"I can't believe what I'm seeing!"

The house was enormous, a mansion to be sure, with plenty of flat rooftop and the little tower they'd planned rising into the air at one corner, situated right on the edge of the cliff, overlooking the water. The entrance was a garden straight out of the most beautiful dream, with immaculately kept little umbrella-shaped trees, lovingly entwined with morning glory vines and everywhere were blooms in a thousand shades of purple, pink and blue. White hydrangeas and roses lined the iron fence, the gate of which rose fifteen feet and proudly displayed their crest on each wing. A stone walkway wound its way through the center of it all.

"I should have asked you about putting the wading pool right in the front yard, but I hoped you would like it..."

Sara grabbed his face and gave him a big, enthusiastic kiss. "*I love it.*" She grinned, "You built the house! Harry I can't believe this is real! Let's *go!*" She ran a few steps, then returned and threw her arms around him, nearly crushing the air from his lungs and just as quickly she was running up the walk, dragging him along by the hand. "*Come on!*" She laughed, "Hurry up!"

Sara grinned her way to the front gate, the skirt of her dress billowing out behind her, and came to a stop at the step, the smile fading away, replaced by anxious confusion.

Harry saw what she was looking at and dropped his eyes to the ground, letting go of her hand and turning his back. The memory of that night still haunted him, anger darkened his brow and he shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Why did you do this?" She asked with sweet-laced concern. "Harry, why did you paint the door black?" She couldn't take her eyes from it. It was troubling just to look at. Not only was it poorly done, just slopped on and bare in places, but black paint stained the stone block all around the door. The knob and hinges were darkened. Great splotches of dried paint splattered the floor of the porch. In fact, the hardened brush and poorly sealed paint can sat nearby, forgotten. "Harry?"

He spoke with his back turned, pretending to admire the view of the wading pool beyond the garden.

"Sara, do you have any idea how it felt for me when you returned the ring?"

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She fell silent at his words, her eyes on the door, painful understanding darkening her countenance.

"No." She whispered, "Only how it felt to send it." Sara turned and rested her head against his back, her arms slipped around him. "Tell me."

"I understood all of it, you know. Why you had to leave, why you couldn't see me or accept my letters. I don't hold any of that against you. But the ring was like a death blow. It was over, I thought, my life

ripped to shreds, my heart bleeding, and none of it making any sense. I died inside that night, Sara. And this house was the symbol of all that I'd lost."

"I'm so sorry." She managed as her silent tears stained his shirt, "I wanted to do what was right. I never meant to hurt you."

He spun on her so suddenly that Sara stumbled back a step with a sharp intake of breath.

His voice was thunderous, his eyes angry and injured. "*Then why did you do it?!*" He shouted, "Did I not matter in the end? Did you really think turning your back on me, leaving me with nothing but a cold apology was the right thing to do?"

"That's not how it was!" She cried, her hands cradled her face, her shoulders slumped. "I couldn't go on! Didn't Nikolae show you what I had become? What good was I to you? To *anybody*?" She paused as Harry's eyes softened, "You said you died inside that night. I was *already dead*. The blackness that consumed me consumed my faith as well. Harry, I've never known such despair! If it wasn't for Nikolae..." She turned away in painful frustration. He could never understand.

"Did you no longer love me? Do you love me now?"

"You know I do. You were there last night. I thought I'd made my feelings for you very clear."

Harry's anger melted away at the mention of the night and just as quickly his arms were around her and she buried her face in his shoulder. "I'm so *sorry*, Harry. I thought my life was over, I thought I could never be happy again, but then he made me see that I couldn't be happy because I wasn't with you."

"You're home now. That's all that matters. Yes, I'm angry, but these things take time I guess. It would be foolish for us to think things could go right back to normal."

"I tried to tell you..."

"I know, but at that moment I didn't want to listen. We'll get through it all. Just don't leave again."

"I promise you Harry," She lifted her tear stained face to look him in the eye; "I'll never leave you."

He pulled her closer and hugged her to his chest. He hated it when she cried, especially when it was because of him, but there was no rain today. Not a drop. In fact, the sun was shining brightly down on them.

"Come on." He said and took her hand, "Let's go inside."

* * *

"It's beautiful, Harry." Sara whispered as she stepped through the tall glass doors that led into the courtyard. "It's like a painting."

Harry removed the spell that had frosted the glass of every surrounding window, which he'd cast while Sara was admiring the lobby. He wanted to show her the rest of the house first, and save this for the grand finale. Harry smiled as he watched her, standing stock still, gazing around in delighted wonder, her fingers touching the Fortificus Charm.

Sara wanted to cry with the beauty of it all. The emerald velvet grass, littered with flower petals stirring in the breeze, dozens of trees alive with tiny purple blooms, violets everywhere and pinkish moonlight roses nestled amid purple flowers of every description. Little tufts of blue forget-me-nots vied with dark green vines for ground cover and added a glorious touch of cool to the warmth of the gardens.

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In the corners were the mythical and fictional statues she'd had carved from fine Italian marble and scattered here and there were the intricate benches she'd sent, cut from the same material. In the center, like a pinnacle to the rest, was the fountain she had dreamed of for many years. Frodo Baggins, her favorite storybook hero, stood steadfast and noble upon his pedestal, surrounded by jets of water tinkling like chimes into the pool below. The Ring on a chain around his neck, cloak cast over one shoulder, his soft curls frozen forever in stone. One brave hand rested meaningfully on the hilt of his sword, *Sting*. Frodo's eyes were directed upward, toward Mount Doom perhaps, or some formidable foe soon to be defeated.

"We're like him, you know." Sara said without turning as Harry arrived by her side, "Little people, gentle in nature, and with our own burdens to bear. We, too, bend under its weight, but somehow persevere through the help of our friends." She took his hand, "Yet in the end we stand alone."

"I never thought of it that way." Harry whispered, staring across at the bench he'd occupied the night he had related the ring he'd worn around his own neck to that of Frodo Baggins'.

"Harry?" She finally turned to look at him, "When can we move in?"

"Well, I don't know. There's no furniture except the stuff you sent."

"That's easily remedied. We'll stay in the cottage while we do our shopping. And Harry? Do you still want to marry me? Even after this morning on the front step?"

"Of course I do! Sara, just because we have some things to work through it doesn't mean we aren't totally meant for each other. What does your palm tell you?"

She looked at it and was relieved to find no more rings where the lines separated, just one solid one, except for a small space, barely noticeable, where the line disappeared altogether. "That you'll never leave me." She smiled.

"August first? Does that date suit you okay?"

"Are you serious? It's only a month away!"

"No more waiting, remember?"

"That's a lot to get done in a month."

"Okay, August 14th. It's a Saturday and it will give us two more weeks to get everything ready." He helped her onto a bench and put his arm around her. She rested against his shoulder.

"I think it could be accomplished." She smiled dreamily, "I'll need a dress and so will Hermione and Susan. I don't know who else I would have. Where do you think we should have the ceremony?"
"Hogwarts." Harry grinned, "And we'll have the party here afterward. That way all our friends can see our new house at last."

"We'll have to show a few people before that, you know. Ron, Hermione, Uncle Albus. We need protective wards and he's the master. He knows the spells that protect Hogwarts."

"Yes, and we'll need help decorating." Harry agreed.

"Who will you have stand up for you?" Sara wondered.

"Ron of course. Seamus, Neville."

"But I only picked two."

Harry cleared his throat, unsure of how this suggestion would go over with her. "Sara? There's someone who's a big part of our group, although I know how you feel about each other..."

"NO!" Sara's eyes grew wide, "Not *Ginny!*"

"She might refuse, but even so at least you made the offer of friendship."

"Is it what you want?" She asked, eyes downcast, considering.

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"Yes."

"Then I'll ask, tactless as it is, and I hope she says no."

"Thank you." He smiled and kissed her head, "It means a lot to me. To Ron and Hermione as well, I'm sure." He felt now was a good time for a change of subject. "I suppose you'll have Dumbledore walk you down the aisle?"

"No, actually. There's someone else I had in mind."

"Please don't say Snape."

"Snape."

"Ugh. Is that really necessary?"

"Yes."

"Fine. Then I'll have Draco Malfoy as ring bearer."

"Now you're being ridiculous."

"Well, it's an equally horrible idea."

"Harry, Severus has always been there for me. I love him and he's been a wonderful friend. I don't see what's so horrible except the fact that you hate him."

"Whatever makes you happy."

"You make me happy."

Harry smiled as he looked at Sara, sunlight collecting in her hair and in her eyes. Just yesterday he'd thought he might never see her again. But here was his Sara, and his whole life had changed in an instant. Right when she'd walked through the door last night and, thankfully, interrupted dinner. His eyes grew anguished as he recalled how she had looked then, cracked, brittle hair that nearly touched the floor and black as death. Her once beautiful skin dry and matte, her face a testament to sadness. She was *his* Sara again as he looked at her now, smiling and radiant, but the shadows had yet to leave her eyes. Something troubled lurked just behind them and it made Harry's heart ache.

Harry glanced at his father's watch. "Come on, We're set to meet Ron and Hermione in London in less than an hour."

Sara hastily took his hand and he helped her up. "Of course, we'd better get ready." She followed half a step behind, still holding his hand.

Suddenly, Sara stopped and he turned to see fear underlying her countenance. "Harry? Let's just send an owl and schedule it for another day."

Harry gave an incredulous laugh. "You caught *all those Death Eaters* and you're afraid to see your own best friends? Sara! They can't wait to see you!"

"I'm terrified."

"Don't be. I promise, you won't be sorry you went."

"Are we going to tell them that we're getting married?"

"Well," Harry considered, "it *is* in six weeks."

"Then I guess we'd better."

"We'll wait for the right time."

"Agreed." Sara said and held the door for him. Together, they hurried down the corridor of their new house.

* * *

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Draco left his house for the first time in several days. It was only afternoon and he had no clear idea of where he was going, but he had to get out. He had been inside for so long that the bright sunshine hurt his eyes and he put on sunglasses as he slid into the cool of his limousine. *To hell with Voldemort's orders*, he thought. He would lay low when he *felt like* lying low. For now, he would get some lunch and maybe do a little shopping.

It was too hot for the silk shirt he wore, but Draco had known this when he'd put it on. His mother had always told him it was *improper* to wear short sleeves unless he was dressing casual and Draco *never* dressed casual, even in summer. When he was home he would lounge around in a tee shirt and shorts, but not when he went out, even for lunch and shopping. Besides, the cooling charms he cast on his clothes always allowed his confidence to endure.

It was his father who had told him an impeccable presentation was the key to success. Draco smiled as

he thought that no one ever had faults to point out when it came to his appearance, except the fact that he appeared to have no faults.

So here he was on a hot Saturday afternoon, riding in his air conditioned limo wearing black trousers and a green silk shirt with his long platinum hair tied back, watching the muggles go about their miserable, insignificant lives on the busy streets of London. His mind wasn't on muggles, though. It was on a book that he had helped steal a few days before. The man who carried it had died. And Voldemort now had Sara's book. Since Granger had turned hers into the Ministry for safe keeping last year, and it had promptly disappeared, that was all four. Draco wondered what the Dark Lord planned to do with them.

Big Ben chimed 2pm in the distance and the limo pulled up to the Criterion's front entrance. The door was opened and Draco slid across the seat and into the shade of the awning, leaving his father's snakeheaded cane, which he had been carrying around since last year, in the car.

"A table in your darkest corner." He told the Maitre D matter-of-factly. "Where I can see everyone else."

"Of course, Sir." The stout bald man replied. He had one of those annoying twisted-up mustaches that Draco wanted to grab and yank. "If you'll follow me, please."

Draco gave a gracious half-nod and took to staring at the shiny spot on the back of the man's head as they made their way across the room, which was unnaturally sparse of lunchtime patrons.

The table was to his liking and Draco ordered a glass of merlot, his preferred wine since his phase of defiance against his father, when he'd turned to muggle luxuries just to infuriate him. He had always kept a bottle hidden in his room at home to help him get through his father's parties with his sanity intact. He had a nice collection of it at his house, too, and enjoyed a glass with dinner often.

He added a Caesar salad and some pasta entrée that the waiter recommended. To tell the truth, he wasn't all that hungry. Especially when he spotted Harry Potter and the Weasel walking in, with Granger in tow, who was deep in what appeared to be an exciting and delightful conversation with Sara.

He didn't know Sara had returned and his heart leapt into his throat as his eyes lingered on her. She looked fabulous, he thought, resplendent in a pretty white cotton sundress, her long golden hair twisted up and piled on her head in the general fashion of summer. She looked glamorous, yet casual and carefree, and Draco wondered if she had forgotten the fact that she was a murderer. Strangely, it was his father's words that drifted into his thoughts at that moment. *Impeccable presentation.*

He wanted to talk to her in the worst way. He had been thinking about the day they would meet again, as Sara had once predicted as she'd stood in his Hogwarts dorm room with tears in her eyes. He thought about the necklace she'd given him then, the Amidon which still felt warm against his skin where it lay under his shirt. The necklace which he had never removed since she'd placed it around his neck two years before. His fingers found it now, and pressed it closer against him.

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He couldn't talk to her like this. Not while she sat at a table with the three amigos. He would feel foolish approaching them and decided against it immediately. In his mental wanderings of this day, never once had Potter, Weasel, and Granger been part of the picture. When he finally spoke to her, it would be alone.

* * *

Hermione pulled Sara through the street toward a store with enormous display windows, featuring the latest in designer wedding gowns and elegant bridesmaid's dresses. They'd left Harry and Ron at the tuxedo shop and now hurried with giddy delight through the entrance and into a lustrous white splendor of finery. Both girls stopped to stare, enchanted, at the hundreds of shimmering gowns, smiling as the reality of the approaching wedding became something tangible, something they could create and make happen in glorious style.

"Hermione?" Sara said through her smile, "I've been living in a dream for two days now. Don't let me wake up until we've left this place." She grinned at her friend, "However did you know where to find it?"

Hermione took Sara's hand. "Ron and I are getting married when I'm done with Auror training. It won't be until next summer and we haven't set a date or anything, but I came in here a few months ago just to, you know, get some ideas." They had wandered over to the nearest rack of white dresses, but had yet to look at any. "And Sara. You're *not* living in a dream. This is real! You're marrying Harry and *today* we're going to start picking out your wedding gown."

Sara's smile widened and lit up her countenance. "Well then let's get started." She said, looking around at the many racks, "But where to begin?"

An immaculate saleswoman was walking toward them and Sara turned to greet her. She would take all the help she could get, for as it was, it would take six weeks to look through them all.

* * *

Draco sat in the back of the limo, watching through the tinted glass. Sara had gone into a bridal shop with Granger more than three hours before and had yet to emerge from it. He could only wonder who was getting married. Remembering the flashy diamond he'd seen from across the Criterion earlier, he had a good idea of who it was. His heart sank as he thought of this and resentment burned inside him. Had he ever really *liked* Harry Potter? A part of him thought that he had, but really they were just partners in misery for a time. If Sara had chosen a different course of action so long ago, he would never have spent a single night on the roof of the tower or stepped foot into Potter's house. It seemed more likely that Draco had used Potter as a crutch of sorts, someone to talk to who understood and

nothing more. Besides, nearly two years had passed since he'd asked Harry for help and as it was Voldemort still lived and breathed. He was still a Death Eater. He owed Harry Potter nothing. He longed to see her. Every fiber of his being wanted to see her smile, which had always filled his stomach with butterflies, wanted to reach out and touch the softness of her hair, to remember what it was like to be in her presence. But not *here*. Not while she was shopping for her wedding dress and with Granger around for that matter. He would just have to wait for that one moment when she would be alone long enough for him to 'bump into her'.

Draco lowered the muted glass by a switch beside his left hand. "Driver." He instructed, "Go into that cafe and get me a mocha latte. Don't be *taking your time* either." Draco pressed several muggle pounds into his hand. "Get yourself something as well. I don't want you falling asleep tonight."

"Yessir." Was the reply from the front seat. The almost elderly chap practically leaped from the car and hurried away toward the coffee shop, pushing the notes into his pants pocket as he went. No sooner had his driver disappeared than Sara and Granger came out of the store and stood talking animatedly over some fabric swatches, their arms laden with bridal books and magazines.

* * *

Sara checked her locator. "It says they're *drinking*. They must be in that pub on the corner."

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"Come on, then." Hermione grinned, "Before they're pickled."

Harry and Ron were perched on stools at the end of the bar, drinking pints and, surprisingly, going over some fabric swatches of their own. They also had a small pile of catalogs and the girls added theirs to the top.

"How goes it?" Sara asked as she and Hermione took seats on either side of Ron and Harry.

"Mind boggling," Harry answered. "I thought tuxes were simple!"

"Yeah," Ron agreed, "They've got a bloody *million* in there and then there are *accessories*." He rolled his eyes and took a hearty gulp of beer. "Let's just wear dress robes and get it over with."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Don't be a spoil-sport, Ron! It's a *wedding*, not the Yule Ball."

Ron mumbled something about *his* wedding, which Hermione ignored and Harry and Sara smirked at. Hermione and Sara ordered sodas and sipped them through straws.

"So what are our plans from here?" Harry asked the others.

"Well," Ron answered, "what are our options?"

"Sara and I need to buy some furniture for the house, you still need to see it, and we have some planning that needs to be done." Harry considered, "You could help us shop and then we'll hang out there for awhile?"

"Gee, I thought we might be heading down to The Phantom later." Ron frowned.

"Well we can if you want..." Harry began, but suddenly broke off when he saw what was coming.

Hermione's brow creased in annoyance. "Nonsense!" She said and gave Ron a cutting glare, "Harry, we would *much* rather see your new house, especially since we'll be having the reception there. We'll need to know what it looks like before we can start the planning." She shot another deadly glance at Ron. "We can go to The Phantom *anytime*!"

Ron gulped, embarrassed. "I just thought we should celebrate?"

Now Hermione smiled. "I think you're right! We could pick up a few bottles of wine right down the street and we'll stop at the market, too. We can make dinner."

"Right!" Sara said, her eyes alight, "The kitchen in the cottage has everything except food. And don't worry about wine, Herms, I sent plenty home while I was gone."

"And if wine doesn't suit you, Ron," Harry grinned, "I have enough 'Swill to stock a warehouse."

There's a whole room just packed full of it."

Hermione looked surprised at this. "Harry, that's not the best idea, you know. Light a match and there goes your new house."

Harry appeared to have never considered this before. "Good point. We'll serve as much as we can at the wedding then."

"Well let's go." Hermione slid from her stool. "What are we shopping for?"

"The house is nearly empty, so furniture, I guess. I don't know. What's the closest store?"

Since Hermione knew the city best and seemed to recall where everything was in frightening detail, she offered a response. "There's a furniture store only a few blocks from here. It's got great stuff, Sara, you'll love it."

"Lemme finish my pint, will ya?" Ron complained, doing his best to gulp down as much as he could without chugging the whole glass. Harry, however, simply pushed his away, still half-full, and got to his feet.

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Sara waited on the front step, the door propped open for a little summer cross-draft. Hermione waited just inside, her arms laden with bridal catalogs and several copies of Bride magazine and Harry still stood next to his stool, waiting for Ron to finish his beer. He'd made good progress, the glass was nearly empty and Ron had moved to a standing position. Harry had already gathered up the stack of catalogs and fabric swatches from the tuxedo shop and now they were all just staring expectantly at Ron.

"What?" He asked over the brim of his pint, "When your mum is *my* mum, you don't go wasting *anything*."

He finally swallowed the last of it, set the glass down on the bar, and made to take some of the burden from Harry's arms. Harry looked Ron in the eye and spoke in a hushed voice from the side of his

mouth. "Take Hermione's, you git!"

Sara had gone outside ahead of the others with one purpose in mind. She'd had the feeling since lunch, but hadn't noticed anyone lurking around. There were six or seven limos lining the street, all with darkened windows, but limos were to be expected in the higher end of London's elite shopping area. Her eyes landed again and again on one of them, but she felt no threat from it. It wouldn't surprise her if she was being followed, but thought it very well could be a remnant of the constant anxiety of keeping her book safe in Romania. Maybe she was just being paranoid.

* * *

Draco lost them beside the same cow pasture he'd been subjected to in Potter's Jaguar. He even recognized the retired old workhorse who presently looked to be dead on his feet. They'd used the port-key and gone to the cottage, then. Only he had no clear idea where that was. He knew it was on the Channel, as the water was to the east, but he would have to scour the entire coast within a few hours of London in order to find them. He was sure Potter's place was unplotable, but thought he might recognize a few landmarks here and there. Like "*The Golden Fish*", a restaurant he remembered passing only a few minutes after leaving the cottage. This was a job for his Lightning Mach 1.

Draco leaned forward as he lowered the glass panel. "Take me to the Manor."

* * *

Staying at the cottage turned out to be a great idea. Each had forgotten the fun of being a group, especially Sara, who found it hard to believe that only a few days before she had stood on a ledge, waiting to see if she would let go of the rail. The past 2 years now seemed to be just the blur of a half-forgotten dream; her life seemed to pick up right where it had left off. She was back among her friends, she had her Harry and their magnificent house to look forward to, she had Hogwarts and her beloved Uncle Albus only a port-key away and Lucius was just a bad memory. She remembered only the good times. Harry, parties on the roof of the tower with Seamus and Susan and Neville and Mary, trying on clothes for hours with Hermione and helping Ron with his homework. The only thing she lacked now was Draco Malfoy. She missed him immensely, though she knew he probably hated her and she had the idea that seeing him would upset Harry. Everyone thought that Malfoy liked her as more than a friend and they were no longer in school. Actually seeking him out so soon after coming home might be a bad idea. Perhaps she'd wait a few weeks and send him a note. Invite him to lunch or something.

As it was, the dinner dishes were rinsing themselves in the sink, then moving to the dishwasher of their own accord after a wonderful meal where Ron and Harry did most of the cooking. Hermione and Sara had mostly done the prep work and set an elegant table. Sara had chosen several bottles of wine from the cellar, all excellent in honor of the occasion, and three of them were now empty as they moved to the living room to relax and talk awhile, the room alight with flame from dozens of candles and a roaring blaze in the fireplace.

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They had toured the larger house as soon as they'd arrived, and both Harry and Sara had been thrilled by Ron and Hermione's reactions to it. Immediately Hermione had started making plans for the decorating and threw off a hundred ideas until she fell into an animated conversation with Sara about the possibilities for the reception and the two of them wandered off together. They'd been too hungry to see everything, so Harry promised to take them through the basements and the rooms he'd carved beneath the house after breakfast and said they could go out in his row boat, which now had a motor attached. He only hoped they would all fit in it.

"So what did we end up getting today?" Sara asked the room, "I remember ordering twelve matching sofas, 6 love seats, and 18 chairs for the lobby, after that, it's all a blur."

"Seven beds." Ron offered, appearing to be deep in thought, "Those odd lamps, too."

"Seven bedroom *suites*." Hermione corrected, "And Sara, I think the guestrooms should be themed. They would be much more fun to decorate."

"*Themed*?" Ron looked like he'd stuck his hand in something unimaginable. "Who wants to stay in the Slytherin Room?"

"Ron, where *do* you get your ideas?" Hermione rolled her eyes. "There are *seven* guest rooms and only 4 houses at Hogwarts. Besides, we aren't students anymore. We've moved beyond such trivial things as school houses."

"Well, we could use literary themes; it would go along with the statues in the courtyard." Sara considered, "What do you think, Harry?"

"Can we do a room for Batman?"

Sara and Hermione laughed, Ron just looked perplexed.

"Who the bloody hell is *Batman*?"

* * *

Draco returned to his house on the hill exhausted, his hair a mess from the wind, his face red from hours and hours of flying with no success. It was nearing the hour of 5am and he collapsed onto his bed after throwing his clothes on the floor. He was tired, overly so, but found he couldn't sleep. He couldn't stop thinking of Sara. Seeing her today had knocked the wind out of him. She'd left so long ago that he truly never expected her to return to London, much less return to Harry. And now the two of them were *getting married*. Draco turned pale at the thought of it, rolling onto his back to stare at the canopy. It seemed he would *never* get his chance.

The idea of marrying someone other than Sara was ludicrous. No other girl held his fascination the

way she did, or connected so well with him that she could change his deepest beliefs simply by being in the room. His heart raced whenever she turned her eyes to his and with it came an acute awareness of his own breathing. Sara had the most affectionate way of smiling, like nothing in the world pleased her more than running into him outside Potions class.

His thoughts wandered to the Yule Ball, as they often did, even though he'd given the later half of that memory to Potter for safekeeping and the emotion usually attached to it was diminished. He still remembered the swirl of a shimmering black cape and Sara smiling mischievously as she offered her hand and said "*Come dance with me*". Refusing her would have been impossible. There was nothing he wanted more than to be close to her, and dancing with Sara was an experience in grace and elegance. Her touch left a pleasant sensation in its wake, like low voltage.

So much had happened between them, he wasn't sure how she'd react to seeing him again. The fact that she'd killed his father presented a multitude of unknowns, but he had to seek her out. He had to know. And then, there were two words he would have to say to her.

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Draco rolled onto his side and lifted the muggle photo of him dancing with Sara and brushed his hand across the glass. He clutched the Amidon, swinging freely from its chain, and the familiar warmth radiated through him. Draco's eyes fell closed as the frame came to rest atop his chest. He slipped onto his back, the exhaustion finally giving over to sleep.

* * *

Hermione and Ron stayed for nearly a week. With their help, Harry and Sara had amassed enough furniture for the four of them to stay in the house, but it was silently assumed by all that the first people to spend the night there would be Mr. and Mrs. Harry Potter. They remained at the cottage or in the tower at Hogwarts, planning the wedding and the reception, as well as going over samples and photographs from the interior decorator Sara had recruited. Also, there was to be a small party Saturday night where the engagement would be formally announced. This party was to be held in the new house and would include only their closest friends.

It was Friday and Hermione and Sara were out scouring the city for medieval embellishments for the dining room, which was currently full of enough suits of armor for half the Royal Army. The armor had been Harry's find, and a good one indeed. They gleamed beautifully in the rich light of the dining room, all polished brass with scarlet plumes attached to their helmets, lending a warm and regal feel to the room.

The master bedroom, which was inside the little tower at the back of the house, was almost completely furnished. The drapes had been hung, the walls painted and adorned with the renaissance paintings Sara had sent from all over Europe. At the westernmost point in the circular wall was a doorway onto the roof of the main house and a small spiral stair which opened, by trapdoor, onto an observation deck on top of the tower itself. A large telescope was mounted on the easternmost turret, which provided an excellent view across the Channel.

The rooms just below the master bedroom were the first part of their suite. It sat in the back corner of the house, not actually a part of the tower at all, but the foundation upon which it was built. It was much more spacious, contained a cozy sitting room, a fireplace, and a small kitchenette, useful for little more than making tea or sandwiches. The bathroom was of a generous size and tastefully done in marble. The dressing room was big enough to hold all of Sara's clothes and more. It was actually a large chamber with a vanity, tons of mirrors and racks of accessories with five walk-in closets lining one wall. One for each season, and one for nothing but shoes and handbags. In fact, she'd already brought the stuff she wasn't wearing over from the cottage and hung them in the proper places.

There was still more to be done, of course, but the general living areas were coming along nicely and all four of them were nearly run ragged. All the lists the girls had to make, the shopping, the phone calls, not to mention the grueling job of choosing a dress, were delightful, yet exhausting. Harry and Ron did a lot of errands and worked at the Swill Factory as well, but managed to lend a hand in the planning. Thankfully, they were down to a few choices for their tuxes and would wait for input from Seamus and Neville before the final decision was made.

Keeping the wedding a secret from everyone was difficult, mostly because they were all bursting with excitement and dying to tell Dumbledore and McGonagall and Seamus, Neville, and the Weasleys. Sara, of course couldn't wait to tell Snape she was getting married and couldn't wait for Saturday's party. She could hardly contain herself.

For the most part, Sara's relationship with Harry was like being enveloped by love itself. The intimacy they felt was strange and wonderful and her heart ached just to look at him. She missed him when he left the room and he always looked so relieved to see her again when he returned, his eyes reflecting Sara's own inner glow. They talked a lot, mostly while wandering the woods together or puttering around in Harry's little boat, and the closeness they'd once felt was nothing compared to the bond they now shared. Sara often worried she'd be overcome by the strength of it.

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Harry had accepted the new facets of her personality with little or no resistance, but there were moments when his face would darken with some small reminder of the things that still hurt him, wounds that were slow to heal. The length of her absence. The lack of communication. Harry would turn his eyes away and mutter "*not that you would know*" in reference to some past occurrence. This was like an arrow straight to the heart and Sara often cried in the bathroom out of guilt, but she knew he loved her still. She saw it in his smile, felt it when he touched her face as he so often did, and when he kissed her the world had a way of just melting away to nothing.

Sara and Hermione returned to the cottage tired, but in good spirits. It was yet another warm July day, the top was down on the Jaguar and the 20 minute drive from the cow pasture was refreshing. There were dozens of shopping bags crammed behind the seats and even more in the boot, so Sara beeped the horn in the hopes help would come out. She soon heard the bustle of Harry and Ron coming onto the porch and levitating wooden pallets down to the car. She had managed to narrow her choices of wedding gowns to 28 today and making the choice was harder then she had ever imagined. There were so many that were elegant and totally exquisite that she wasn't sure she could ever decide on just one. Hermione had done well today. Since they were to have an evening wedding, she'd chosen midnight purple for the attendant's dresses and that was more than fine with Sara. In fact, she wondered if Hermione'd picked it just to please her. And on top of that, she was down to only seven styles. They'd ordered the flowers from the shop in Diagon Alley for the reception as well as the engagement party the next night. On such short notice, they couldn't fill a large order, so Sara thought she could spend the evening cutting fresh roses to round it out. She and Hermione could finish up the invitations after dinner, and then she would sneak off to the courtyard for an hour or so since Harry planned to listen to a Quidditch game on the Wizard Wireless Network. She'd spent two years alone, and now she was always with someone else it seemed, and a little private time surrounded by roses sounded just wonderful.

* * *

"What do you want *now*?" Draco snarled as he found himself back in the catacombs under the ruins, looking at Voldemort.

"Disturb you *yet again*, did I Draco?"

"Not really. Actually, I was kind of bored."

"We're going to open Potter's books in just a few moments. I thought perhaps you'd like to join us?"

Draco smiled appreciatively. "You *know* I do."

"Follow me." Voldemort walked from the room and Draco followed, "I have been most anxious for this."

The room was filled with several people. Wormtail of course, a few others he saw now and again, the two creepy guys he'd gone with to get the book from the muggle on the train, Crabbe and Goyle were there with their fathers, but they did not greet him when he entered.

The books were arranged on the table point-to-point to form a square of empty space in the center, where there was some old relic that didn't look like anything recognizable, it was so old. Draco moved into the shadows and leaned against the wall.

Four wizards performed the spell to open the books while the Dark Lord looked on in quiet anticipation. It went quickly and Draco watched curiously as light sprang from each book and connected with the relic to unite in the center. A large archway appeared, like a liquid mirror, and he wondered where it went.

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Voldemort walked around the table, considering the archway from every angle. There was a long silence, and then he pointed to the younger Crabbe and Goyle. "You two. Pass through the arch, then come back and tell me what you saw."

Crabbe and Goyle shared a nervous glance, then turned their eyes on Draco in the hopes he would get his old friends off the hook. Draco smiled and waved, but made no move to speak up on their behalf.

With obvious apprehension, Goyle pushed Crabbe ahead of him with a pained expression and watched as Crabbe climbed onto the table, stepped into the archway and vanished. He hesitated only a moment, and then followed.

* * *

Sara sat on the grass in the courtyard, alone in the light of the moon, which turned the thousands of roses surrounding her to gossamer silk. Humming as she worked, the many baskets she'd brought along were filled with flowers and finally, she thought she had enough.

An idea had appealed to her as she sat there and she went to the study, still bare except for a desk and a chair, and found the stationary that bore their crest. She hesitated as she looked at it, wondering if maybe plain parchment would be a better choice. There was some in the cottage, but that would mean explaining what she was doing if she ran into anyone. She could always lie, but knew she would not. And this letter she would rather keep to herself. Sara dipped a quill in ink and began the letter she had wanted to write for two years.

Dear Draco,

Words can't explain how sorry I am. I never meant to hurt you and I can only hope you believe it. You know what I was going through with your father and we both knew someone had to put an end to it. Like you said, he wouldn't have given up. I only wish there had been another way.

I trust that you're well. Severus said that he'd seen you a few times and that you seemed to be coming along, but I worry about the news he gave me. My heart keeps telling me it can't be true, but the fact that you welcomed my companion and me into your home while we posed as Death Eaters tells me that it must be. Draco, this is not the life for you and I know you did not choose it. I don't hold against you what you are or what is forced upon you...

Sara crumpled the letter and threw it in the trash.

Leaving the desk, she paced the room, wondering what to do. She *had* to see Malfoy, had to apologize to his face for killing his father. There was no way she could send him a letter after all this time and expect him to react favorably. He would see Lucius' murder as a betrayal of their friendship, of this

she was sure, so it was best handled in person, even if he would never forgive her.

The Orb of Arassel had told her little over the years. She knew he was bitterly angry and that was about it. There was something significant about what she'd seen the night they said their goodbyes at Hogwarts, but Sara didn't know what it was. She had seen the future, Draco's hair was long like his father's and he looked at her with pain and hatred in his eyes. She wondered what it meant. Sara was sure he still loved her in some way, she'd felt it the few times she'd reached out with her mind and sensed his innermost feelings. And the expression on his face when he'd spoken of her the night she and Nikolae had recovered the book from him. He loved her, just as she still loved him, even though the closeness they'd once shared was but a memory.

Sara returned to the desk and withdrew a clean sheet. This time, the words came a little easier.

Draco,

I know how you must feel toward me after all that's happened, but I must see you. We need to talk and it shouldn't wait. It's been too long already.

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Please accept my most sincere invitation for lunch tomorrow at two o'clock at Angelo's in the Royal Westcott Hotel. Please come, Draco. I've missed you.

Forever your friend,

Sara

She sealed the envelope with a trembling hand and gave it to Topenga, who had just flown in through the window. She took off with it at once and Sara sighed. She had no idea how he would respond. Tomorrow was a busy day. With the engagement party scheduled for 7pm and now a trip into London at 2, it was sure to be a challenge. Hermione and Sara had picked up their party dresses today and hers was already hung in the closet at the cottage, so all there was left to do tomorrow was a short stop-over in Diagon Alley. Hermione was brewing some kind of potion and needed a few ingredients for it, which Sara had volunteered to pick up. Plus, there was the setting up to think about, and the caterers would surely be there early. Then there were at least a hundred fresh cut roses to arrange and it was her responsibility to get them all into vases. She would have to start early and keep her lunch with Malfoy under 2 hours.

* * *

The Quidditch game between China and England was still in progress when Sara crawled into bed next to Harry, who was sound asleep with the candles burning. It was well past midnight, so Sara switched off the WWN and tried to sleep. It was useless.

She couldn't get her mind off Malfoy. She was afraid to see him, didn't think she could bear his anger and imagined the hateful things he might say to her. She tried to force good thoughts, but to no avail. Certainly it would be nice if he hugged her and smiled and reminisced with her over a wonderful meal, but it's not what would really happen and she knew it. She only hoped he would hear her out before he left her life for good.

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27. Forever August

Sara sat at the table, sipping a glass of water, wondering if she should have said something more. Malfoy was now 45 minutes late, it was clear that he wasn't coming, and Sara struggled not to cry. She had been so full of hope, as scared as she was, but the thought of seeing Malfoy again filled her with happiness and anticipation. Now, the reality was that he had stood her up. The disappointment was nothing compared to what it meant.

He hated her, plain and simple. He had taken his friendship away without discussion and would never forgive her. For two years she'd wondered about this moment, not knowing how Draco would react, but she had always believed deep down that he still loved her on some level and would be glad to see her again. She'd never expected *this*.

She wanted to get up from the table, to have him come hurrying in after being held up somehow and find her gone, but it was just such a thought that prompted her to give him a few more minutes. After all, it was *Draco*. He would never do something as tacky as this. He would have sent a note.

Sara leaned her head on one hand, propped up on her elbow as she straightened the silverware for the millionth time, took another sip of her fourth glass of water, and sighed. Movement caught her attention and she perked right up, her eyes scanning the room for a blond head walking toward her, but found only disappointment. Why was she waiting here? What difference was ten more minutes going to make? Except for making her feel even worse, waiting was a waste of time, really. The more she tried to force this reality on herself, the more upset she got and wasn't surprised when the sting of imminent tears burned her eyes. She choked them back silently, though Sara was beginning to lose control of her emotions. It was so hard not to cry! Her heart ached, knowing that someone she loved, someone who'd once loved her, had abandoned their friendship. Conspicuously, Sara dabbed at her eyes, hoping no one in the crowded restaurant was watching as she tried not to cry in public, but she simply couldn't help it. The pain of this loss raged, radiating from within until she was wrapped in a cloud of grief that darkened the shadow over her soul as the black streak grew a little bit more. The sadness swelled in her and she knew she couldn't hold it off much longer so, throwing a few bills on the table, she hurried out of the restaurant.

Outside, the walk was crowded with mid-day traffic, but Sara only got halfway to the car before the sensation of being watched took hold of her and she turned to face the street. It seemed to be business as usual, cars, busses, pedestrians, limos, taxis, people riding bicycles, skateboards, and scooters. But the feeling was there and the more she accepted it, the stronger it became. At once she was sure it was

Draco and let her mind reach out to him, her eyes slipping closed in concentration.
"I know you're there." She thought, "Draco. Show yourself to me. You owe me that much."
"I can't." Was his reply.

It was faint, but Sara had no trouble making it out. She had no idea he had the ability to reply and the fact that he could was astounding. The talent was even scarcer than a true seer.
Her purpose over-riding the surprise, Sara let her eyes drift closed again.

"You're watching me." She said, "I need to see you. I know you're angry."
No reply.

"Do you still love me at all?"

No reply.

Sara turned away and hurried to the car, her head bent to hide her eyes; she fell into the seat and pulled dangerously into traffic, doing her best to speed away. Clouds rolled across the sun, darkening the city and chilling the air before the rain came down. Thunder shook the skies and Sara weaved around traffic in a desperate attempt to outrun the confusion of cars and the commotion of the city itself. The top was down, but Sara felt right with the rain driving in on her, pooling on the leather seats and drenching her hair and clothes. Drops of it ran down her face to blend seamlessly with her tears.

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Faster she drove the jaguar as the traffic thinned and the highway stretched out before her, heading east.

* * *

Harry stood back, the remote control in his hand. He held his breath and pushed *power*. He'd purchased the giant television earlier in the day just to spite Sara and smiled when it came to life. She would hate it, he knew, right there in the sitting room of the master suite, but if she could meet Draco Malfoy for lunch like her note had said, then he could have a ridiculously large television. He'd purchased four movies he knew she wouldn't like and perused the stack, dropping onto the sofa with a sigh. Why wouldn't she tell him she was going? Why sneak out with nothing more than a scribbled note that gave no specifics? It seemed wrong to Harry. She might have discussed it with him before arranging to have lunch with Malfoy, who was currently working for Voldemort and had sworn to kill her on more than one occasion. It was reckless, irresponsible, inconsiderate, and stupid and Sara should know better. Here she was, after two long years, back to her old habit of making bad decisions. She was the same old Sara, but so many aspects of her had changed that Harry often found himself caught off guard by her fierce determination and her eyes, once doe-like and innocent, which now held a challenge. She had become passionately independent and the childlike vulnerability that brought them together so long ago had turned into something else. Something much deeper. He remembered her then, so beautiful in the moonlight of her tower rooms, frightened, her eyes wide as she looked to him to protect her. What he saw in them made him silently swear to defend her at all costs. He fell in love with Sara that night and as they lay asleep in her bed he'd never felt so safe.

Harry sighed again and fell back into the cushions. He didn't want to be angry at Sara and he understood why she went, but it was the way she went. Sneaking out before he woke with one of her dreaded notes by the bed. His heart seized every time he woke up to a note and he wondered if this possibility ever crossed her mind. There was nothing more terrifying than an early morning note from Sara.

And he was worried deep down. She had been gone many hours. If not for the locator, he wouldn't even know if she was alive. She could actually be hurt right now, "traveling" to St. Mungo's or running away from Malfoy and he wouldn't have a clue. The locator was no good in those situations. He could try the Orb of Arassel, but Sara always took it with her in the form of a ring which she wore on her finger. That was one consolation. At least she had the Orb to protect her.

Harry cast the movies aside and they landed softly on the couch beside him. Pushing himself out of the most comfortable sofa in all of England, he found himself standing in front of a shelf, staring at a golden clam shell. It had been a long time since he'd thought about it and barely remembered to bring it over from the tower at school. He'd almost forgotten it there, but somehow Malfoy always managed to drift into his thoughts.

He had never considered going back into Draco's mini-pensieve. Once had definitely been enough. For months afterward he'd been tortured with dreams about Sara snogging Malfoy. So why was he considering it now?

Harry lifted the lid and looked in. Silver mist swirled and cleared, clinging to the edges to reveal a frozen night, full of stars and Harry found himself looking at Sara, smiling and tipsy, through Malfoy's eyes. He leaned in closer, and felt a pull, like a gentle hand behind his neck, helping him in.

He stood once again before the bench, watching as Sara's head came to rest on Malfoy's shoulder and his arm snaked around her. Draco was terrified, though quite happy with this arrangement, Harry could tell. Malfoy's hand shook as it pushed back his longish white hair and Harry could swear Draco's heart was about to jump right out of his chest. It was almost comical; the way Malfoy looked so vulnerable at such a simple gesture, though Harry wasn't amused. This scene, the emotion that had been displayed so long ago, unraveling before him now gave him an uneasy feeling. What he saw between them in this moment in time drove a steak laced with jealousy through his heart. It was clear to him as it had never been before. Sara and Draco had loved each other once. It wasn't one sided. It wasn't an 'innocent friendship'. They were friends because they had to be *something*.

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"You're right, you know."

Harry spun around, startled by the voice. It was Sara, her eyes red, her face wet with tears. His heart softened and he restrained himself from hugging her.

"I did love Malfoy. What's more is I still do." She hesitated, but he didn't respond. "Not like I love *you*, of course. But I do love him. As *what* I don't know."

"What's wrong? Sara, what did he do to you?"

He could hardly hear her whispered reply, her eyes steady on his, but trembling with tears. "He stood me up." She sniffled and wiped her eyes. "He hates me Harry, and the feeling is so..." Her hand rose to touch the Fortificus Charm, "...it's... very painful." His arms went around her and her head found his shoulder as if it had rested there every night for the last two years. "I was wrong, Harry. Killing Lucius was a mistake. One that can't be undone."

"It *wasn't* a mistake. And Malfoy doesn't hate you, Sara. He told me so himself."

She thought on this for a moment then, without reply, pulled away just enough to watch herself kissing Malfoy on the bench in their elegant finery, looking like a couple of silver-haired gems in the moonlight, they sparkled like the glitter that adorned her hair. She recalled their amusement at the fact that they had both opted to wear black silk with crushed velvet capes, lined with the finest satins. It was vain, she thought, but it had occurred to Sara that she and Draco looked quite good together.

Everyone mentioned it 7th year, and to see herself with him now, more than two and a half years later, the reality came to her. They complimented each other perfectly, like two halves of a whole. Like twin spirits. He was her physical equal. Unfortunately, that's pretty much where the similarities ended. They simply had a few things in common, enough to develop a rather deep, though respectable, friendship built on emotional hardship, overwhelming problems, predispositions, respect and teen angst. Yet she still harbored a strange sort of love for Draco, a kinship almost, and to be rejected by him after all this time was profound and devastating. She tightened her arms around Harry.

"You shouldn't be here." She said and looked up at him, her eyes full of concern. "This is a moment I gave to Malfoy. One that I never wanted you to see." Sara stepped back and took his hand. "He was in hell, Harry. His mother murdered, his father ever tightening his grip. He was confused and there was no one he could trust. He had no real friends except me. And he loved me."

"It was torture for him, to see us together, to know that I chose you over him. I saw it every time I touched him. I could feel his pain, and the dark aura that surrounds him would warm and brighten when we met in the halls. He loved me completely, without reserve, and I vowed to deny him forever. But how could I deny him this one moment? There was agony in his eyes when I looked at him and I thought, if one kiss would make his life better... but the reality of it is, *I wanted to*. That's the only thing that haunts me. The guilt, the idea that I'd betrayed you has stayed with me to this day. I wanted you to know before the wedding."

Suddenly they were tumbling to the floor of the master suite.

"Are you alright?" He asked.

"You landed on my foot and tripped me." She chuckled and took off her shoe to rub the sore spots.

"Actually, I think I sprained my ankle. Know any spells?"

"I can get rid of warts." He smiled and gingerly cradled her leg in his arm. "It's already swelling. Does it hurt?" He poked a gentle finger into the just emerging bruises.

"Ouch!" She cried, then fell into a fit of giggles, "*I hate you!*"

"You *loooove* me."

"Oh *shut-up!* That hurt!" She laughed and he grinned.

"I don't think you should walk on it. It looks pretty bad." He carefully lowered her leg and lifted her onto the couch. "I'll be right back." He said and hurried around the rooms collecting things.

The laughter left her voice like a sigh. "I'm sorry you had to see that, Harry."

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He turned to look at the back of the couch and spoke to it. "I've seen it once before." He said, "My first Christmas alone."

Sara said nothing and he wished he could see her face. He hadn't meant for it to come out that way.

"I'm sorry." He mumbled, hurrying to her side and then set about covering her with a light blanket. The rooms were cool, as if air conditioned, but it was just a spell Hermione knew.

"You'll need to keep this elevated." He lifted her leg onto a pillow and turned to look at her. "I didn't mean to land on your foot."

She smiled, propped up on a big fluffy pillow. "I know. Its ok, Harry. I'll be fine, I'm sure."

"It's these damn shoes!" He decided, holding up a strappy sandal, and then tossing it to the floor.

"I didn't know you could *get* booted out of a pensieve!"

"There's only one memory in it. The bigger pensieves work differently."

They shared a meaningful glance and Harry took her hand as he sat on the floor beside the sofa. He kissed it softly and brushed his thumb affectionately across her fingers. "I understand about Malfoy, you know. The fact that you love me is the one thing in this world I think I've always been sure of. I had my doubts now and again, but it was in response to my desperation, not my *true* feelings. Neither of us is blameless." He hesitated, "I did the same thing with Ginny, not once but twice. Each time for a totally different reason, but it's all the same in the end."

"I've always known that you kissed Ginny. Picked it up from Ron a few weeks after. And I read your journal. It doesn't matter to me, Harry. I know who you love." She smiled and brushed the hair back from his face, "Besides, everything's different now. We're not children anymore."

Harry thought for a moment, wondering if he should explain his indiscretions with Ginny the way Sara had just explained Malfoy. Something told him to move on, that Sara already understood, for their

reasons were practically identical. There was no use lingering on sore subjects.

"I kind of miss it." He absentmindedly smoothed the blanket under his hand, "The old days, student life. Of course, I don't miss the homework or Potions or Boring Binn's class, but I miss having all my friends in one place. I miss sharing a room with Ron, Seamus, Neville and Dean. Everything's so complicated now, and on a much larger scale. I miss our little world."

"I know exactly what you mean." She agreed and rested his head against her as she smoothed his hair.

"I miss you sneaking to my tower after dinner. I miss the innocence we all possessed." She grinned with the memories, "I miss the Swill parties."

"Me too. We were all so terrified of getting caught, but we'd blast the stereo anyway and keep the entire population of Hogsmeade awake until the early hours." He laughed, and then added; "I really miss getting into trouble."

"You certainly had your share of that. *Ouch!*"

"I'm sorry! Did I bump your ankle?"

"No I'm... ouch!" She felt around beneath her, "I'm laying on something."

"Oh, sorry! The movies! I forgot I left them there!"

It was now that Sara noticed the big TV. "You bought a television? You were mad at me! *Weren't you?*"

"Yes."

"Ok, I deserved that one." She sighed and gave him a resigned smile. "So? What am I watching first?"

She frowned as she looked at the titles. "Harry, you have the *worst* taste in movies."

* * *

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Draco spent the next few hours searching for the cottage Harry had taken him to. He'd scoured much of the coast already, but considering its length and the size of the little house, the task was next to impossible. He heavily regretted not meeting Sara. He'd waited so long to see her, followed her all over London hoping for just one moment alone, and even got a new outfit for their lunch together. Only he couldn't go in when he got there. He'd had every intension to, but something Voldemort had said to him made him keep his distance. And he was also afraid. It had been so long since he'd seen her last.

Voldemort's orders had come with a choice, but one he would rather not have. How could he ever make such a decision? But the answer was easy. Of his two options, one was simply unthinkable. Hope had to remain. It was the *only* choice.

His mind drifted over the night Voldemort opened the spell books they'd stolen from Potter and his friends. Draco had nearly laughed himself silly as Crabbe and Goyle returned through the archway sweating profusely, each holding a tropical drink and with sand all over their trousers and shoes. Voldemort, of course, was furious. A *gateway to Majorca*. The whole thing was just so hilarious, after all they'd gone through to get these books, and Draco nearly doubled over in the room full of Death Eaters. Voldemort, however, was not amused. Draco had finally overstepped his bounds, but he had learned one thing. *Never* laugh at the Dark Lord.

It was several days before he left the catacombs, weak, barely able to walk, and heavy of heart. His destiny sinking in with every thought of the orders he'd been given.

His cowardice had always overtaken him when it came right down to it, as it did now when faced with his task. Part of him was dead set to ignore Voldemort's command, but he feared the promised consequences of doing so. He always thought he would react differently in such a situation, but his weakness demanded he put himself first.

Dropping his broom to the floor, he collapsed onto his bed, not bothering to undress or pull down the coverlet. His eyes fixed on a beam of moonlight that crept across the ceiling in the dark, wondering how to get out of this. He had to leave Voldemort without getting caught, but with the Dark Mark on his arm it wasn't possible. The Mark could locate him anywhere, growing cold and painful on his skin at Voldemort's whim. And that made Draco himself a puppet, though a reluctant one at that. Death was the only way out.

Draco decided in the morning he would make one last attempt to find Sara. He needed to spend a few precious moments in her presence before passing forever beyond her reach.

* * *

According to Harry, who kept popping in and out, there were a good many wizards and witches accumulating in the lobby. Dumbledore was here, as was McGonagall and a few others from Hogwarts. Seamus and Neville had brought Susan and Mary, (to Sara's delight,) and half of the Weasley clan had arrived. Ron and Hermione of course, had been there most of the week and were currently playing the hosts while Harry tended to Sara.

"No sign of her yet?" Sara sighed, asking for the sixth time if Madam Pomfrey had arrived.

"Nope." He smiled apologetically as he fluffed the pillow under her leg, "I've got Ron keeping an eye out for her."

"But I *have* to get dressed! Harry, I still need to shower! There must be *someone* out there who knows how to cure a simple little sprained ankle!"

Harry grew frustrated with his lack of answers. "Well there *isn't!*"

"Did you bother to *ask?*"

"No, Sara. *I read their minds.*"

"Are you telling me *Hermione* doesn't know a few spells? All I need to do is *stand up!*"

"She told you herself that she didn't! Did you think she was lying?"

"How would I know? *I just want to get dressed!*"

"Well you're going to have to wait."

"Where's Severus?"

"He's not here yet. I told you *last time!*"

"Help me to the dressing room." She said, pushing herself up and tossing the blanket aside, "I'm *not* missing the party."

"Sara!" Harry leapt forward when she tried to stand and his sudden movement startled her so that she lost her balance and dropped back onto the cushions. "Sara *sit down!*"

She cast a sarcastic eye on him as he examined her ankle, which she'd bumped painfully. "I think I will, thanks."

"You're going to make your ankle worse. After all, everyone who's looked at it said it was bad."

"Then help me, Harry! *Please!* I could be *all ready* when Madam Pomfrey gets here."

Harry sighed, then lifted her in his arms, carried her to the dressing room, and set her down in a chair.

"Is this what you're wearing?" He examined a deep-blue party dress that reminded him of the sky as night falls. "I hope so."

"Yes." Sara answered, gingerly rubbing her ankle. "That's it."

"You'll have to skip the shower. You look fine, anyway."

"It appears that I'll *have* to. Just getting the dress on and a little make-up is better than just lying there on the sofa while our guests enjoy themselves."

"I could always carry you around."

"I hardly think that's necessary. I have some potions I think could help."

"You shouldn't take anything. It might interfere with what Pomfrey gives you." He said as he helped her undress, "It's best to wait."

"I guess."

Harry brought over the small collection of undergarments and accessories she'd laid out in advance, minus the high sandals, similar to the guilty pair still discarded on the floor of the sitting room.

Confounded, he held something up, considered it for a moment, and then handed it to Sara, who put it on with an amused grin.

Carefully, he slipped the pretty blue dress over her head, then helped her up to smooth it down. He sat her back on the stool and wheeled it before the vanity. She watched in the mirror as he took to brushing her hair.

Sara thought of telling him she was perfectly capable of moving her arms, but didn't want to spoil the moment. She loved when he brushed her hair. He used to do it all the time when they lived in the tower together, each morning before school. She found the gesture so affectionate and so sensual; she could do nothing but sit silently as gentle hands caressed her hair, watching his reflection.

* * *

Draco's eyes blinked open in the dark. He sat bolt upright, the sheets slipping down to pool around his waist. Struck with an idea of such simplicity, he threw off the covers and hurried into the first thing he could find and stopped only to comb his hair before running out to the limo. Of course it was deserted. He'd dismissed his driver before taking off on his broom hours ago.

He had never walked down the hill to the lights and bustle of the city before. It didn't take long in the car, but that didn't mean anything. He judged it to be around the same distance as walking from Hogwarts to Hogsmeade and hastily made his way to the front gate.

The clear, balmy night turned out to be perfect for walking and Draco found it was nice to be out without cooling charms under his proper clothes. He was comfortable in shorts and a tee-shirt and glad it's what he'd left by the bed. He felt *common*, but he also felt *anonymous*, which was also nice. He blended the way that muggles do, and his appearance on the sidewalk drew no one's attention. His long blond hair was tied back and a bit of it came loose to fall in his eyes. Draco pushed it aside and smiled when a car full of muggle girls waved as they passed. He raised a hand in return and crossed the street.

There was a pizza shop on the corner and the aromas that drifted out awakened his appetite and brought him to a stop. He'd brought muggle money with him for the taxi, but he was hungry and he'd never had pizza before. The taxi was pressing, but what would it hurt? Two men a few years older than Draco wandered out of the shop, engaged in conversation as they ate a couple of slices. They barely noticed him as they continued down the walk. The idea had never occurred to him, to actually wander down the street while eating from a paper napkin and with his hands. Sitting at a table with his food was simply something he had always done. Draco went in.

"Only got a couple slices left." The grossly obese, thirty-ish man at the counter called out to him as he entered. "Just about to close up."

"Whatever you have is fine." He replied, "I'm in a hurry."

"Just be a minute if you want it hot."

"Is it better hot?"

The man cocked his head and gave Draco an odd look. "Most people think so."

"I'll wait."

"You want anything on it?"

"What are the choices?" Draco wondered, intrigued by this new twist. Pizza came with *things on it*.

"Topping list is right there." The man, covered in a flour-dusted apron pointed above his head at a

lighted sign. "We're out of ham."

The list was long and several things looked good. "What do most people get?"

"Pepperoni's popular."

Draco could almost sense the guy rolling his eyes and began to feel embarrassingly ignorant. He had no idea what pepperoni was, but he ordered it.

It was heaven, plain and simple. It was so much better than anything else he'd tried that Draco couldn't believe such a delicacy had never graced the Malfoy family table. A similar entrée existed in the wizarding world, though his mother had never served it and what they were given at Hogwarts didn't even come close. Pepperoni, he found, was beyond delicious. Together with grease and cheese, an Italian sauce and some sort of bread it was *fantastic*.

The only problem was that he wasn't able to walk and eat at the same time. He had no choice but to duck into a doorway and ate with haste. He had no idea how far away Harry and Sara lived, the ride might take hours, and it was already after nine. He had to hurry. Stringy melted cheese left grease all over his chin and wiping it away became such an annoyance that Draco decided to just leave it there and clean it off when he was done.

"Are you going to eat the crust?"

"Huh?" Draco spun around to find a muggle girl smiling at him. She wore old, dirty clothes, her hair was dirty and her bare, unpolished toes stuck out the side of her ratty, dirty sneakers. "What did you say?" He tried to sneer, but only managed an odd look. Under the grime, she could almost be pretty. SpookyMulder The Girl in the Tower page 375

"I was just wondering if you were going to eat the crust. Some people don't and I'd rather get it *before* you toss it." She smiled again and he saw her discomfort. Some remnant of pride that would probably never leave her.

"Is the crust good?"

"Definitely. I think so anyway."

"Yes, I'm eating it. I was planning on it, anyway. I'm *starving*."

"Are you now?" Her smile turned soft and disappointed. "I'm sorry I bothered you. G'nite."

Draco heard her stomach erupt with hunger from at least seven or eight feet away and he hesitated as she turned to leave. He'd found the disturbance unwelcome and up until this point, he only wanted the homeless waif to push on ahead and leave him and his pizza in peace. Now, however, something in her demeanor made the guilt he rarely felt loom up and seize his senses.

"Wait!" He said and stepped out of the doorway.

She stopped and spun around, her eyes sparkling and hopeful.

"I have another slice. You can have it if you want."

"Please say you're not kidding." Her stomach rumbled again.

"It's got *pepperoni* on it. It's great, you should try it." He smiled and held out a paper plate.

She took it and dropped onto the doorstep, devouring the pizza as if she hadn't eaten in a week and he thought that maybe she hadn't. He had never been so close to what his father called The Dregs of Humanity and his mother called The Destitutes. (unless Weasleys counted.) The girl before him who was almost pretty, her filthy brown hair pulled back in a piece of blue yarn, intrigued him. He wanted to be repelled, disgusted by the faint odor that clung to her, afraid of the germs she spread with her presence, but he wasn't. Not really. He wanted to know why she chose to live this way.

She was done eating before he finished his crust.

"I'm full." He said and gave her what remained of it. He watched as she ate, strangely affected by her obvious hunger. He smiled when the crust was gone and gave her his handkerchief. "What happened to you?" He asked, curiosity getting the best of him. "Where are your parents?"

"I ran away." She admitted with a heavy sigh. "My mom and her boyfriend are lousy drunks and they fought all the time. All night long, usually. We lived in a roach infested tenement over in Manchester. Not the nicest neighborhood, either. It was hell so I left."

"Maybe you should go home." Draco offered, "I'll have my driver take you if you'd like."

"And why would I do that?" She asked, "I may die on the streets of London, but it's better this way."

She said and stood, "I'm happier."

"How long have you been like this?" He gestured at her appearance, "Where do you live?"

She shifted her weight from one foot to the other and answered as if Draco was from Scotland Yard and this was an official questioning. "I left home the day I graduated from school last spring. I waited tables after classes until I'd saved enough to rent a dumpsy little flat and buy food for a couple of months with the hopes of becoming an actress. Yeah, I know, same old story. It didn't work out the way I'd planned. I got a job at the grocery, but they sacked a bunch of us back in March to cut costs, ya know? I couldn't find another job. I lost my flat and burned through the few pounds I'd saved in a couple of weeks."

"I'm sorry." He said and stood up straight, clasping his hands casually in front. "Though I have to say, it was a dumb idea from the start."

* * *

"You're feeling better, I take it."

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"You could say that." Sara smiled as Harry lazily danced her around the atrium.

"It doesn't hurt at all?"

"No." She lied.

The announcement of their upcoming wedding had gone over quite well, with one exception. Snape

insisted they wait, but Dumbledore said they'd waited long enough. Besides, Snape's whole outlook changed when Sara asked him to give her away. He graciously accepted and his pleasure at having been asked was obvious. Seamus and Neville agreed to be in the wedding as well, so did Susan. There was one little problem. Ginny hadn't come.

"We can talk to her about it later. We'll go to the Burrow tomorrow."

"Harry, come on! You can't still be on about having Ginny in the wedding are you? Do you even know how *tacky* that is? Can't I just try to make up with her and *invite* her to the wedding?"

Harry opened his mouth, and then closed it again.

"Did you see poor Mary's face when she was the only one who wasn't asked? She gave me the most dejected smile from across the room, Harry. I thought she was going to cry or something. Besides, I don't really like Ginny. Don't ask me to be a hypocrite."

Harry sighed. "You're right, Sara. I don't know what I was thinking. Ask Mary."

She smiled with relief. "Thank you."

* * *

"Christina!" Draco yelled into the semi-quiet darkness, "Christina! I need to talk to you!"

"What is it?" He heard from above.

Draco craned his neck and stepped back into the street. There she was, leaning over the high edge of a rooftop, her warm brown eyes smiling. He smiled back.

"I need to find something. I was wondering if you could help me." He held up the bag, "I stopped at the bakery."

"I'll be right down!" She said and was gone from the edge. A few moments later, she was hurrying toward him from around the side of the building. She carried her raggedy shoes in one hand.

Draco handed her the bag of pastries and moved to sit on the step. He sat facing her, leaning back against the wall, with one leg bent to rest on the step, the other stretched out casually on the sidewalk. She sat looking straight ahead with both feet planted firmly on the walk, the bag in her lap. She offered it first to him.

He took one and slowly nibbled at it as she ate three in less than a minute, then took a fourth and leaned against the wall with it, in much the same position as Draco. She smiled as she took a bite, the worst of her hunger temporarily sated.

"You said you were looking for something."

"I am. I need a phone book. Can you help me find one?"

"A *phone book*?" She chuckled, "You're kidding!"

"I assure you I'm not."

"There's a market two blocks down that street." She pointed across the way, "You'll find a pay phone on the wall outside. Hard to find one with the book still attached."

"How is the book used?"

"Are you for real? You act like you've never used the phone before."

"I haven't."

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Christina eyed him suspiciously for a moment, then her lips curled in a slight smile. "You're rich aren't you? You're *flawless*. Even your fingernails."

Draco looked at his hands and gave her a mildly smug grin. "I might be."

"Of course you are. But you're the *good* kind of rich. I mean, you could be anywhere, doing anything right now, yet here you sit with someone like me. You're a good person, Draco. I don't see such kindness everyday."

Draco was struck dumb by these words. No one had ever said such things to him before. And she meant it. She actually thought these things about him, that he was a good, kind person. A new avenue opened up before him in this moment, an opportunity to start anew, where no one knew his father, where no one knew what he'd been like in the past, where the name Malfoy was not feared.

"Good, it's still here." She sighed as she slid the doors open and slipped into the booth. Draco leaned in as she pulled the mammoth book onto her lap. "Who's number do you need?"

"A restaurant called The Golden Fish. It's on the Channel, that's all I know."

The mousy-haired girl thumbed through the whisper-thin pages, flipped back a bit, then settled on a column of tiny print and ran a finger down it. "Here it is!" She announced and Draco leaned in closer, trying to get a glimpse of what she was looking at. "2377 Main St. in Princeton Heights."

Draco committed it to memory, and then tore the page out of the book, just in case. This he folded and stuck in his pocket. "I'll be off then." He said and smiled, "I'll return to buy you breakfast for your assistance." He walked her back to where they'd met.

"You don't have to, you know. I mean, I would have done it, you know, anyway." She stammered and fidgeted nervously. "Besides, I'm not usually welcome in restaurants." She brushed at her dirty jeans and attempted to straighten her ratty old tee-shirt.

"My house, then. I don't know how to cook, but I have a pretty good kitchen staff."

Christina smiled as she looked for sincerity in his cold gray eyes and approved of what she found there. "I would like that."

"I'll find you." He said and hurried around the corner.

Draco nearly ran all the way up the impossibly steep hill on top of which he lived. His only goal to get to his Lightning Mach 1 and to find a little sea-side town called *Princeton Heights*.

* * *

Lights spilled from the looming darkness that could only be the house Harry was always going on

about the summer they'd stayed on the roof together. In many ways, the best summer of his life. But that was before Potter gave up on him. Turned his back and forgot that his old buddy Draco was suffering every moment of every day with a mark on his arm that made his soul want to cry out with the injustice of it all. He hated taking orders from Voldemort. He hated the other Death Eaters and the greedy, malevolent middle men who'd feared his father so. Most of all he hated being trapped, the immense feeling of helplessness and of desperate hope. And he hated Harry most of the time.

They'd been rivals since day one, but somehow he could never measure up. Harry was a fair and honest opponent, and even though Draco often played dirty or cheated, Harry always caught the snitch. And now Harry was marrying Sara. At last Harry had beaten him at *everything*. But then, he always won in the end.

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"The Boy who Always Wins" Draco sighed and carried his broom along the flower-lined path through the woods. Little foot lights help guide the way, but they weren't bright enough to reveal his presence. He pulled the hood of his cloak down over his eyes and hurried through the garden gate. An old oak on the corner of the house provided him with an excellent view of the lobby and all the smiling, happy wizards inside. It was a smaller gathering than he had expected, mostly just their Hogwarts friends, their families, and the Hogwarts staff. A few people were dancing, most mingled with sparkling drinks in their hands, and soft music drifted out to greet him.

It occurred to Draco to hate them all. Every last one of them. The righteous do-gooders that undoubtedly thought he was a person to loath and never to trust. A person in the image of his father. A person to be judged by the Mark he bore unwillingly.

Fortunately, a small part of the old Draco remained, not the Slytherin bully he'd once been, but the Draco who'd befriended, and ultimately failed, Sara and had spent half of one lazy summer in meaningful discussion with Harry, gazing up at the stars from their beds, side-by-side on the roof. He longed to join them. He could almost taste the champagne as a lively symphony rose and fell on the air, violins caressing his ears and lifting his spirit. He could see Sara now, talking with Professor Snape as they stood at the end of the buffet, casually eating elegant slices of cheesecake drizzled with raspberry sauce. They did a lot of laughing, Sara leaning against the wall, her eyes sparkling, surrounded by dozens of roses. Slowly, the smile left her face and she turned her eyes from Snape. She looked straight ahead at the window, which was halfway across the room, and would have had a clear picture of Draco, but she saw only her own reflection, of course. None the less, she had sensed his presence. He mentally prepared to flee and gripped his broom nervously.

At least have the decency to knock at the door. She finally said.

Draco had no idea how this worked. Did he think his response and she would read his mind? He didn't believe she'd understood him outside the restaurant. He remembered her words so clearly, like a whisper in his mind. *Do you still love me at all?* His response had been soft and quiet, and seemed to resonate only in his own mind. *Yes.* He'd said, and then she'd run away, trying to hide that she was crying and tore into the street as the thunderheads gathered above.

He concentrated on her, trying to push the thought through the window and across the expanse. He wanted her to hear him. *I can't.*

I won't come out.

No. He thought, his brow furrowed in concentration, his eyes meeting her gaze. *Don't come out.*

Why are you here? Why did you stand me up?

I'm sorry. I meant to go in, but I couldn't.

Why? Weren't we once the closest of friends?

I have my reasons.

Why wouldn't you answer me? I know you can, obviously.

I tried. I didn't know how. His hands curled into fists. *I do love you, Sara. I'll always love you. Even if you marry that idiot Potter.*

The date is set, four weeks from today.

I see. He said, his chest tightening, his heart crying out for him to speak his mind here, now, before it was too late. *Congratulations.*

She said nothing for a few moments. He felt her mind reach out to him, felt her hesitation, then she withdrew once more. Suddenly, Sara left her place at the wall and walked straight to the window. Pressing her hands flat on either side of the glass, she rested her forehead against it and looked out at him, shining like a diamond in the tree outside, his long silver hair stirring in the salty breeze and collecting the moonlight. It lit his pale complexion and she smiled. She'd waited so long for this moment. *It's so good to see you.* She sighed. *I missed you, Draco. I thought about you every day.*

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Draco sighed with his entire being. *I missed you, too. More than you know.*

Come to the back door. Let me see you properly.

I can't. He said again.

I need to see you.

I have to go now.

No. She said, *Don't go!*

I'll always love you, Sara. You know where to find me if you change your mind about Potter. You've been to my house once before. He stood and straddled his broom. It killed me, you know. To be so close to you and not tell you who I really was. Draco, I desperately need your forgiveness.

He said nothing, only hovered there for a long moment, holding her eyes and wishing he could say the words she wanted to hear. Finally, he disappeared without reply.

* * *

It was a long trip back to London. It was only about 30 minutes at top speed, but Draco liked to fly high, far above muggle power lines, up where there was a chill to the air. He was still in his shorts and took the Lightning Mach 1 a little slower than usual. He would freeze if he flew too fast and the flight took just over an hour.

He was glad to return to his room, drop the broom on the floor, peel off his clothes, and head for bed. He tripped over the broom and caught a soft landing on the mattress. "Damn!" He cursed, tossing the offender a few feet away and rocking back to cradle his left big toe. It occurred to him that he'd been riding the same broom since 7th year when his father had always provided him with the latest and fastest new model. Now the old Lightning Mach 1 was careworn and outdated. He would make a trip to Diagon Alley soon and purchase the new *Nimbus XL Pro* everyone was talking about. The Chudley Cannons had recently switched to this broom and suddenly began winning games.

He also needed to pick up a good dose of poison. At least he could try the Nimbus out before he put the poison to use. Escaping Voldemort was something he could no longer put off. Sara surfaced in his mind and something painful twisted in his chest. He thought of her pressed against the window, looking out at him from her engagement party. She looked beautiful as always and his heart grieved as he thought of her words. *Four weeks from today.*

It was over. All the hope that she would one day come to understand how much he loved her sank in his stomach. In the end she had chosen Potter, but she had never given him a chance. Not once. She refused to even consider that he might always be kind to her, give her everything she could ever want, and care for her like no one else ever could. Yet she loved him, of this he was sure. Even the sad, desperate look in her eyes tonight had told him so. The knowledge tortured his soul, yet it held him as well. *She loved him.*

Draco closed his eyes and soon fell asleep, thinking of a thin, almost pretty little brown haired waif, dressed in rags and smiling softly up at him with a hint of pride in her warm brown eyes.

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28. Live Forever

"Sara!" Harry bellowed as she unpacked a few things in the upstairs bedroom of the house. "SARA!" "What?!" She yelled down, exasperated, "I could use a hand with some of this stuff, you know!"

"The TV doesn't work!"

"Why are you watching TV? We're unpacking, in case you forgot! Or should I say *I'm* unpacking anyway."

"I can't believe this! It's brand new!"

Hermione cleared her throat in the doorway, her arms laden with boxes. "Dumbledore put wards on the house last night, in case you forgot."

"So what?"

"So your muggle electronics aren't going to work. Too much magic in the air."

Ron appeared beside her, his arms full as well. "Terrible luck, mate. You'll have to return it."

Harry ignored this and went to the bottom of the little tower that housed their bedroom and yelled up the stairs. "Dumbledore made your stereo work! What spell did he use? We can do it to the TV."

"He didn't actually make it *work*. At least not the way muggles *intended* it to work and I can't get a radio signal on it at all. Your TV is much more complicated. It wouldn't help."

"But they're showing a Monty Python marathon!"

"Well you're going to have to miss it! Now would you *please* come up here and lend a hand?"

Hermione stepped forward and dumped her burden into Harry's arms. "On second thought," she gave him a disapproving glare, "I'll help Sara. *You* help Ron carry all this stuff in."

"Er... ok." He said, struggling to get a better grip on the heavy boxes. "I'll just run these upstairs, then."

* * *

Draco didn't wait for the door to be opened; he just got out of the limo and stepped onto the walk. There was his grimy, *almost pretty* breakfast date, shivering in the cold morning mist, her face wrought with exhaustion as she huddled in the very doorway where they had met. She smiled the second she saw him and stood.

"Am I late?" he asked, wondering that she was already waiting for him with the sun barely breaking through the clouds, casting a thin liquid light through the fog.

"Of course not." She explained, "It's just that you never said what time and I didn't want to miss you."

"Oh." Draco blinked, it had never occurred to him to give her a time. "Well where is your jumper? It's cold this morning."

"Oh, that." She sniffled, "I traded it when the weather got warm, figured I could pick up another one before the start of winter. I forget how cold London can be in the night." She sniffled again and Draco stepped aside the door, gesturing for her to get inside. "Too bad it couldn't be August forever." She sneezed and he gave her his fine linen handkerchief. She smiled, sniffled, and thanked him before taking it and sliding across the soft leather seat.

"Wow, you have a bar!"

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"Yes." Draco replied. There was a substantial bar in his limo, but he had no use for it himself. He rarely drank, mostly when he went to the Phantom or the Underground and then just for show. He would often nurse the same drink all night. Then there was an occasional glass of wine with dinner, but really he'd rather have butterbeer, and once in a while a tequila daiquiri as he floated in the pool

with the warm summer sun melting his drink. In fact, the last time he'd really *tied one on* was when he'd shared his father's Scotch on Potter's 18th birthday. Now Potter was about to turn 20.

The car circled the small city block, turned right, and headed back up the hill. Its passengers rocked back in their seats as the driver gunned the engine to make the climb.

"You look tired." She observed, her voice softening with genuine concern. "I hope you didn't trouble yourself just for me."

"It's no trouble. Just a... *a difficult night*. I couldn't sleep." Draco looked down at his hands and admired his immaculate fingernails in an awkward silence heavy with thoughts of Sara.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" She asked in the same sweet voice. Draco raised his eyes to hers, the shade of brown that he'd always loved, full of kindness and sincerity. Full of compassion.

"Yes." He whispered, pain surging through him as he saw an image of Sara in his mind, standing in her elegant party dress, whitish-gold hair spilling down over her shoulders as she pressed against the window, love and sadness tracing her countenance.

"You can tell me if you want." She offered, "I don't look like much, but I'm a good listener."

The car pulled through the gate at the top of the hill and slowed as they approached the house. Draco smiled, but said nothing more.

* * *

"Ginny, won't you please just *listen*?" Harry shouted arms rigid at his sides, hands splayed in frustration.

"Listen to *what*?" Ginny shouted back, pacing the floor as Harry stood still, her long ginger hair tossed over one shoulder, her brow creased with anger. "I've heard *enough* of your explanations and *rationalizations*. I'm sick of it!"

"Ginny, I kissed you because I *love* you, not because I wanted you to *hate me forever*!!"

"I don't *hate* you! I'm just tired of being hurt by you, it never stops! Now you expect me to be friends with little miss *perfect* who ditched you for *two whole years*? I would rather burn in Hell for *all eternity* than watch you marry the likes of *Sara Lemke*!"

"Why do you *always* have to be like this? Ginny, you're punishing me for *having the wrong feelings*!"

"Oh *shut-up*, Harry!" Ginny shouted half-heartedly and turned her back, staring into the crowded far corner of the Burrow's large family room.

"I was confused." Harry softly admitted, "And Ginny, you're beautiful. How could I *not* be confused when it comes to you?"

She turned to face him, tears in her eyes, but none yet fallen. "You think I'm beautiful?" She asked in a whisper.

"Are you serious?" Harry half-mused, "Ginny, half of Hogwarts thinks you're beautiful. No," a small smile touched his lips, "*all* of Hogwarts. Especially me."

She finally smiled, unable to hold her anger. "I hate you, Harry Potter."

Harry shoved his hands in his pockets and grinned with apology.

* * *

"I have to clean up." Draco sighed. "I'll show you to one of the guest rooms. You can shower if you'd like and I'm sure I have some clothes that you would find comfortable. I can have my staff wash yours while we eat."

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Christina's face lit right up. "Are you sure it wouldn't be imposing?"

"If it was, I wouldn't offer."

She suddenly quickened her pace and practically raced Draco down the corridor to the guest quarters.

He stopped at the door of the largest and nicest room and swung it open for her. "There's a robe or two in the closet. If you need anything at all, ring the bell by the bed. My staff will attend to you."

Christina stepped into the doorway, then stopped and turned back to look him in the eye with a flood of gratitude. "Thank you, Draco." She said, "Thank you a thousand times over."

Draco pushed his hair back with splayed fingers and then clasped his hands elegantly in front, the way a dignitary would, but really it was a nervous habit he'd picked up to hide his discomfort. To keep from fidgeting. He didn't know what to say. "I'll see you downstairs." He managed and hurried away down the hall.

He found Nigel hovering about at the bottom of the stairs, pretending to straighten a vase that wasn't crooked. Draco approached him directly.

"Go wash her clothes. Check the sizes she wears and send for some new outfits. Jeans, comfortable muggle stuff. Get her some make-up and all that other nonsense girls need. Don't forget footwear. And a good warm jumper. Green or black."

Nigel nodded once curtly and hurried away to find female staff, Draco assumed. He traveled down the long halls to his room, feeling strange and out of sorts, but with new purpose.

* * *

Sara sat at a table, her arms hung limp at her sides, her eyes fixed on the Orb. A new darkness bloomed inside her as she considered the meaning of having seen something for the second time. Was it a warning? Was the moment upon her? Sara only wished she'd seen more. It was only a flash in slow motion. She stood in the open somewhere, looking at Draco as he had been last night, sullen, with long hair. She got the impression they'd just broken a heartfelt embrace, as a flood of emotion tore through her when the image came to life. Draco's eyes fell closed and he blurred with movement as the Orb faded to darkness.

Sara wanted to know more. The hairs stood on the back of her neck as the images flashed again and

again across her mind. Only the more she pondered it, the less sense it seemed to make. Was Malfoy in trouble? Was something going to happen to him? Or would she spend months thinking the moment was right around the corner until it drove her mad?

She couldn't help fearing for Draco. He had seemed different last night and there was a hint of sadness in his eyes and in his mental voice, a sadness she remembered briefly from the night his mother was killed. Something was bothering him and it was no trivial thing. It was huge. True, he was trapped in a life he had sworn to denounce, but there was more to it than that. It could be any of a dozen things, or none of them. Sara was sure that something bad would happen to Draco and soon, but what could she do? She knew nothing, the Orb would reveal nothing further, and so she sat at the table, helpless.

* * *

"I can't remember the last time I was so *full*!" Christina smiled, clothed in a dark green polo shirt that went nearly to her knees and a pair of jeans that were ridiculously big on her. She'd rolled them down at the waist, rolled them up at the ankles, but they were still enormous. After all, Draco was nearly six feet tall and she barely made 5'6". His thick white gym socks hung off the end of her toes and flapped when she walked like cotton swim fins.

Draco smiled genuinely. She was actually *very* pretty, now that the grime had been washed from her face and her dirty clothes had been replaced with clean ones. Her freshly shampooed, chestnut hair was long and lustrous, even though it was badly maintained. Even now it was still a little damp at the ends, but without the blue string to hold it back, she was barely recognizable as the girl he'd met last night. She smiled at him in gratitude, laying her immaculate napkin on the table beside her empty plate. "How can I ever thank you for such a *wonderful* meal?"

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"You don't need to thank me," Draco softly smiled, "Your company was thanks enough. I don't have many visitors and I don't usually like the ones I *do* have."

"Why?" She asked, surprised, "I mean, you're so *nice*!"

"Not everyone thinks so." He said and grinned. "Most people think I'm... well, I don't know what they think I am, but they don't trust it. They think I'm the ghost of someone else. Someone who's likeness I bear."

"To hell with *them*." Christina's eyes turned angry, "They don't know you. From what I've seen, you're far more decent than most. In fact, I don't deserve the incredible breakfast I've had, and at such an elegant table might I add, simply for finding you a phone book. I owed you as much for the pizza."

She found Draco's handkerchief just in time to catch a powerful double sneeze.

"You're sick."

"It's just a cold." She smiled, uncomfortable with his concern and shrugged her shoulders. "It'll go away." Again she wiped at her nose and tucked the linen square back into her pocket. "I should probably get going. I've taken up enough of your time already."

"And where will you go?"

Christina said nothing, not wanting to admit that she had no home to go to.

"I insist you stay. At least until you're feeling better."

"I've imposed enough already. Besides, I've had worse and survived." She tried to smile, but Draco wasn't convinced.

"So my company doesn't suit you?" He was no good at this. Trying to politely insist someone remain in his home and his frustration was apparent. His whole life all he'd done was demand what he wanted and in the bluntest of terms. Now, here he was, trying to talk a destitute into hanging out with him. For a moment he thought maybe he'd lost his mind.

"Of course it does! But you must understand. I *won't* take advantage of your generosity."

"Why not?" Draco's brow creased and he crossed his arms over his chest. "Do you *want* to live in the *filthy*, disease ridden streets? I can help you after all, get you a job and a room in a nice hotel and anything at all you want to eat. Or are you *above* working?"

"Oh, don't be upset!" Cristina exclaimed, "Draco, I meant no disrespect and *no offense*! I got myself into this situation, after all. It's no one's responsibility to get me out of it 'cept my own."

"It's *rude* to refuse a hospitable invitation, but suit yourself." Draco said dryly. He was alarmed to find himself upset by the idea of her leaving so soon. "I'm not going to ask you twice, but the offer stands. You'll find I've taken the liberty of arranging for a few things I thought you might need. Take them with you when you go. My driver will be waiting when you're ready." With this Draco shoved back his chair and stalked off to his bedroom.

Christina sat in silent shock. *What just happened?* Everything was going so well, they'd laughed over a huge breakfast, prepared by an excellent chef, and she'd thanked him over a second cup of tea. She'd stayed a good long time already and didn't want to wear out her welcome. She liked Draco, even though they lived in opposite worlds, she felt she'd found a friend in the strangest of places and now she'd gone and screwed it all up. But what had she said to get him so upset? He'd asked her to stay and she'd politely declined. That was all.

A hand touched her shoulder and Christina started, her head spun around, expecting to see his beautiful white hair and his kind blue-grey eyes. Instead she found a tall, gaunt man in his fifties hunched over her shoulder. The eyes she met were beady and hawk-like, the hair short and silverblack. *Nigel*.

There were tears standing in her eyes and he smiled with reassurance. "Come, Miss Safford. You have done nothing wrong."

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She accepted his hand and stood. He pushed in her chair and she followed him out. He remained silent as they climbed the stairs to the second floor.

"I didn't mean to upset him. Just please tell him that for me."

"I will deliver any message you desire, but I was hoping you might decide to say it in person."

"I don't want to annoy him, sir. The message will do."

"Your room, Miss." He opened the door and stepped aside. "Please take your time."

"Thank you." She said and stepped through.

"If you still wish to leave the premises, just ring when you're ready and the car will be waiting."

"No need." She tried to smile, "I can see myself back down the hill."

"As you wish." He bowed gracefully, which was surprising due to his awkward height and thin frame.

"Good day, Miss Safford."

"Good day, Nigel." He smiled as he silently closed the door. The man never made a *sound*.

Christina sighed as she looked at the bed, laid out upon which were five outfits, new undergarments, and a warm and fuzzy green jumper. Four casual sets and one business-type suit, all with shoes to match. She felt the fabrics, all exquisite, even the jeans. They were expensive. Everything was. Her conscious demanded she accept nothing more from Draco Malfoy, but in the end it was her vanity that won out. The very idea of clean clothes, comfortable shoes, and *socks!* Oh, how she *wanted* the socks. It had been months since her last pair had finally fallen apart and now that she had some on her feet, big as they were, the thought of taking them off and leaving was the last thing she could see herself doing! Yet, leaving with a bag full of expensive gifts from someone she had obviously offended was the wrong thing to do. She would take only what she could no longer do without.

Her own worn out jeans and tee-shirt were clean and folded neatly, stacked in a nearby chair. These she carried into the dressing room, along with clean undergarments and one pair of socks. It was here she discovered a plethora of cosmetics, skin care products, cleansers, powders and perfumes. Everything a girl would want in her dressing room. He had gone through so much trouble and she had insulted him by refusing to stay. She knew he was lonely, he'd practically said as much, but she didn't belong here, even though every fiber of her being cried out for her to stay. Christina neatly folded Draco's comfortable clothes, piled them up, and frowned as she slid into her tattered old rags, dirt stained and full of holes. They were crisp and pressed and smelled of fresh lavender. Guilt stabbed her as she pulled the socks over her well-scrubbed feet and slipped back into her ragged old tennis shoes. They had also been cleaned, the laces new, and a good effort had been made to mend them.

With a last look in the mirror, Christina brushed out her long hair, which just a few hours ago had been an unmanageable tangle of greasy snarls. Now it was shiny with expensive rinses, but the ends were ragged and broken. It still looked ratty and awful, like the rest of her.

Draco's clothes were set in a tidy pile on the chair and she found she was ready to go, as ready as she would ever be, and Christina watched out the window at the heavy afternoon drizzle, dreading the thought of venturing out into the grayness and chill. She looked longingly at the heavy green jumper. Tearing her eyes away she made for the door and sneezed three times on the way. There were tissues in the dressing room and as she tossed one in the trash, she thought of the one thing she simply *had* to keep.

Slipping her hand gingerly into the pocket of Draco's neatly folded jeans, Christina found the square of heavy, monogrammed linen. This she stuffed in her own pocket and hurried out into the rain, refusing the offered umbrella, letting it soak her through and drip like cold fingers across her skin. She had never felt so dejected, so *alone*.

* * *

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The night seeped in; splashing the walls with the ink of shadow and Draco lit no candles. Instead he'd instructed Nigel to leave his heavy black drapes open and now, in the darkness, the moon shone through just a little, often disappearing behind silver-rimmed, blue-black clouds. If not for the blaze in the fireplace, he wouldn't be able to see at all, though the fire cast very little light itself.

Finally he rose from the cool of his sheets and went to the small vial that sat alone in a wilderness of mahogany table-top. With a sigh, he held his salvation in his hands yet again, wishing he knew how to pray. Or to whom.

In the past 24 hours he had seen Sara through a plate of glass as he trespassed and heard first hand that she was withdrawing from him forever, marrying Potter and forsaking the love that Draco himself had promised her once in an old neglected classroom years ago. He still meant it, every word, but to have her offer only friendship hardened him a little, and reminded him of all the hurt she had caused him since their first fateful meeting. Then there was the fact that Lucius Malfoy's blood was on her hands. Christina weighed heavy on his heart as well. He couldn't stop thinking about her, cold, sick and alone someplace where there were no walls of protection, no warmth or nourishment. Even *she* had cast him off, and he really didn't blame her. It was a hard thing to keep in mind, but not everyone wanted to be dazzled by his wealth. After all, genuine sincerity could not be bought and wasn't that what he'd tried to do today? Give her everything she needed so she might think him a most agreeable and generous savior?

Draco slipped the vial into his pocket and dropped onto the sofa before the fire, resting his elbows on his knees and his chin on his interlaced fingers, both thumbs pressed lightly into the flesh underneath, holding together a countenance of profound contemplation. As always, his thoughts turned to Potter, who at this very second, was probably sharing an intimate moment with the love of Draco's life.

Maybe trying on wedding bands, or sitting around a table with Granger and The Weasel, laughing joyously over a game of Exploding Snap with his *real* friends, at least the ones he cared about. Draco knew without doubt that if Ron or Hermione were forced to bear the Dark Mark, Voldemort would already be defeated.

Harry would not rescue him. Two years he had waited without hope of escaping the Dark Lord. And in that time Draco's suffering had been immeasurable. The physical and mental torture. Strange potions that bent the mind and opened it to suggestion. Forever wanting to give up and give in. He heard the word "*Crucio*" in all his dark and frightened dreams. He risked time in the catacombs *every day* to spare the people who had turned their backs on him a thousand times over. But the truth of it was, he still *wanted* to spare them. His hand found his pocket and he touched the vial.

Draco stood in a moment's decision and leapt out the window, throwing himself over his shiny new Nimbus.

* * *

Sara crept through the dark cottage and, gingerly sliding a heavy wooden chair across the polished floor, she sat down and removed the Orb of Arassel from her finger. She placed the ring on the table and whispered the spell into the darkness.

Something was bothering her, keeping her from sleep while Harry snored beside her. It was Draco, she was sure of it, but when she reached out to him over the distance, she met with only a dark collage of half-formed thoughts and confusion. Right off she'd thought he was asleep and dreaming, but something told her he wasn't. His father was heavy on his mind.

Sara jumped as a great dark ball of fury descended before her eyes and went to strike out at it, then realized what it was. A bird. A bloody great black bird. She gasped, recognizing the Raven, even in the dark as it came to rest atop the Orb. They stared at each other for a long moment, neither moving, the Raven with its beady black bird eyes fixed on Sara and she with one hand clutching the Fortificus Charm.

"Your master is no more and you bear no letter. *Who sends you?*" She whispered.

The Raven said nothing.

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"I can only guess, since there is now one Malfoy remaining, but why do you come to me empty?"

Silence.

"Is Draco in trouble?" The bird squawked loudly and erupted in a flutter of wings. It pecked at the Orb with its shiny black beak and Sara understood what it wanted her to do.

The Raven finally settled on her shoulder and Sara's hands shook as they hovered around the crystal ball, her breath short and full of fear.

"*Show me Draco.*"

* * *

He hadn't stepped through these doors in many months, and Draco was struck by how cold and silent it was. The vast chamber into which he walked was black as night could be, though he knew the way blind and set off to find what he'd come to see.

Once in the main corridor the sconces burst to life as he neared and Draco padded softly on the marble floor on his whisper-soft Italian shoes, his heart racing, his every nerve alive and his breath coming shallow, jagged, and terrified.

Finally, he stood before a painting, covered in heavy black cloth for more than 2 years now and Draco's hand trembled as he wrapped his fingers around the dusty velvet. He hesitated, then pulled the shroud aside, nearly falling over his own feet in his hurry to back away from it. The familiar drawl of a sinister little chuckle sent icy prickles down his spine.

"*Draco.*" His father smiled, "I knew you'd end up here eventually."

The color drained from his face as Draco stared at the painted image of Lucius Malfoy, dumb, unable to respond.

"You came for a reason, now, didn't you? What is it?" He purred in his same smooth, rolling voice.

Draco tried to answer, stuttering, and his eyes wide. Strange emotions rushed through him in a mad frenzy to crowd each other out. At last, his anger surged and he thrust up his sleeve and pointed his wand at the flesh there. "*Morsmordre.*" He whispered and refrained from wincing as the icy-hot burn of the Dark Mark appeared on his arm as if Voldemort himself was calling.

"I see." Lucius smirked, even more handsome in his portrait than in real life, though the artist who'd rendered it was truly gifted. The image was so accurate it was almost... *creepy*.

"Does this please you, Father?"

"I think you already know how I feel about that. I see you came around in the end. I always knew you'd see the error of your ways."

"This was *forced* on me." Draco spat, "Do you see the life you've made for me? Hatred and misery? Loneliness? Is this what you wanted for your only son?" Draco's anger seethed, though he remained composed and spoke in a low, even tone. "I despise you for what you've done to me! You're *dead* and I *still* can't escape your cursed name."

"Now now, Draco. No use in insults. Without my name you'd be *no one*. Did my legacy deprive you of wealth and power?"

"No."

"Then what are you carrying on about? You were always a *difficult* child, Draco, always wanting something more than what you were given."

Draco fell back against the wall with a resigned *thump*, "Perhaps you gave me the wrong things."

Lucius rolled his eyes to gaze impatiently at the top of his frame and sighed loudly, the sound of the exasperated. "Draco, *whatever* do you want? You can't expect me to listen to this nonsense of yours for much longer. I have many other portraits to appear in, though the fact seems to have slipped your mind."

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"Do you want vengeance, Father?" Draco slid down the wall to sit on the floor and hugged his knees to his chest. A grown man, but looking like a very small boy as he gazed up at the painting with a tremble in his lip, his face creased with pain and anguish at the very thought.

"*Vengeance.*" Lucius let the word roll off his tongue. "I suppose you'd think I would." He sighed, straightened his sleeves, and looked back to Draco. "I've always been a sore loser."

"So you don't want me to kill Sara?"

"Let me pass on a bit of wisdom I was given as a young man, from *Dumbledore* actually. The wisest thing the man's ever said."

"What was it?" Draco wondered.

"*All things come full circle*, he once said to me. Besides, if she can manage kill *me*, I'm sure she would make short work of the likes of *you*."

"The *likes of me*?"

"I had high hopes for you. But then again, you always were more like your *mother*."

Draco stood, the heavy black cloth held in his hands. "I'll see you in hell, Father."

* * *

Harry awoke deep in the midnight hour from a strange dream he could hardly remember. It was about Draco, but the dusty remnants of it were quickly slipping away. He wondered why it had left him so anxious and full of dread, long after the dream had faded from memory.

Sara was gone, as she often was late at night. It was nothing new for him to wake and find her standing barefoot on the edge of the cliff, her arms raised to the sky, and the wind blowing her lustrous midnight cloak out behind her. Her haunting dream-like voice caressed the air as she spoke a rhythmic, elegant old language to summon her favorite element and the surf crashed in furious answer far beneath her. Tonight, though, it was pouring rain as it had been all day, so he doubted Sara had ventured out of the cottage. He would wait awhile. Maybe she was visiting with Nikolae, who occasionally slept in the heavily warded room at the end of the underground labyrinth and would spend a few hours with Sara before going to London or Manchester to hunt. Or perhaps she'd gone out to the sofa to watch the storm as the moon painted the room with pale blue-gray streaks of liquid shadow.

She was often restless these days, with all the planning, the arrangements, furnishing the new house, plus the impossible task of finding the perfect wedding dress. Sara was run ragged, but had a hard time winding down it seemed. There was more to it, though. A new sadness had darkened her eyes since the day Malfoy stood her up.

Harry had a feeling that something was building between Sara and Draco that he knew nothing about. She was dying to see Malfoy, this he knew for certain, and he'd seen Malfoy's inner turmoil first hand, though long ago. Their strange friendship was torn down the middle and neither knew how to proceed. They both longed for the closeness they'd once shared as friends, or whatever it was that they were, but so much had happened that recapturing the past was no longer possible. The old innocence was snuffed out, scrambled and lost, with only the sad ghost of memory to fill the void. In Harry's opinion, the only choices Draco and Sara now had was to become little more than acquaintances, stopping for a polite *Hello, how are you?* When they passed in the street; or to be closer than they had ever been before. Harry pulled the soft comforter up to his chin and rolled onto his side, staring out at the rain-drenched night.

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He had never stopped feeling threatened by Malfoy when it came to Sara. He was still insanely jealous to this day. It was something he hadn't been able to shake off, even though he knew where he stood with both of them and where they stood with each other. Neither had ever tried to hide their true feelings from Harry, always being up-front and truthful when confronted. Not once had Draco ever denied that he was completely in love with Sara, one time even admitting that he planned to marry her someday. Of course *that* conversation had not gone well and they'd ended up in the hospital wing, but it didn't deter Draco from being brutally honest at all times.

Harry could sense that Sara was near him, a strange intelligence he did not understand, but also that she was troubled. Then again, he got that feeling often in the night, when her mind wasn't whirling with wedding plans and happiness. At night was when the *real* Sara came to surface, when she wandered from their bed while the world slept, alone and full of private contemplation. The darkness that remained inside her festered and pushed away her daytime contentment. The shadows would never fade it seemed and Harry again thought that she had stayed away for far too long. The despair that once resided in her, that had pushed her to the very threshold of total and irreversible apathy, had wrought its mark into her very essence.

A floorboard creaked in the hall and Harry immediately shut his eyes and feigned sleep. He was dismayed when the insistent image of Draco Malfoy rose immediately into his mind's eye, accompanied by that same feeling of dread - and urgency.

* * *

Draco stepped into the small lavatory off his father's study, not bothering to close the door behind him. He stopped before the mirror, which was fixed on the wall above the basin. The vial he set on the back

of the sink.

He had been miserable many times in the past, but he had never felt as wretched as he did tonight. Shunned by everyone he knew, Harry, Christina, his father's portrait, everyone that mattered, life had little meaning. Especially when it came to Sara. True she had pleaded for him to see her, but even if he did, she would hug him and peck his cheek, and then she would go ahead with her plans to marry Potter. These weren't valid reasons for suicide, as Draco had no real wish to die, but when it came down to this or Voldemort's orders, it was an easy choice to make.

Draco brushed his hair to perfection, smoothed his eyebrows, and straightened his clothes before collecting the vial and removing the stopper. He emptied it into his mouth without hesitation.

It tasted horrible. Like sewage and rotten meat mixed with heating fuel. It was the vilest foulness imaginable and he retched even before it hit the back of his throat and Draco collapsed over the sink, throwing up his salvation. Dejected, he rinsed his mouth and went out to the sofa. The fire was warm and he was sweating, but the way it radiated over him was a welcome embrace.

He had read in a book once about a girl named Ophelia who drowned herself and the whole thing was rather romantic, but Draco could never do such a thing. Just the thought of having his body found all pale and bloated gave him the creeps.

Then there was Juliet, who thrust a dagger into her own heart upon finding her Romeo was dead. Again, very tragically romantic, until he considered the great pool of blood that would soak his clothes and would, by the time he was discovered, harden into a great stinking puddle of sticky crimson rust. Then there was the favorite at Azkaban, which was hanging oneself. Draco pictured himself strung up from the chandelier, his head lolling comically to one side, eyes bulging; tongue flopped out of the side of his mouth. He cringed and tried to shake the image out of his head. None of these things would do. He should have saved some of the poison. Mixed it in a heavy Burgundy or a strong Merlot. Now he was left with nothing but his wand.

His wand! Why hadn't he thought of it before? Of course! It was so obvious that it had never even occurred to him.

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Drawing his wand, Draco ensured that the note he was leaving, instructions for after he was gone, was in plain site on the stand beside him, leaned back into the sofa, and pointed the wand at his chest. His eyes squeezed shut, his heart racing; he took a deep breath and spoke.

"Avada Kedavra."

Not much happened. He was hit with something, a bolt of pain ripped through his body, but dissipated in a moment of terror. He was still very much alive.

Draco dropped his wand on the rug, let his head fall unceremoniously into his hands, and broke into violent sobs, something he had never experienced, even as a small child. The emotions raged within him, building into a torrent of fear, helpless desperation, and just plain *brokenness*. It was becoming clear to him that he would have to do what the Dark Lord had commanded him to do. It was that or fall victim to Voldemort's promise.

* * *

"Harry!" Sara whispered in the darkness. There was urgency and fear in the way she gently shook his shoulder. He "awoke" at once.

"Are you ok?" He asked, going for his glasses as he sat up, already knowing that whatever it was, it had to do with Malfoy. He slipped them over his ears and noticed the giant crow on her shoulder. "It's that blackbird from the pensieve!"

"This is a *Raven*. Harry, Draco needs your help. Get dressed. *Hurry up.*"

She didn't wait to hear his reply, but crossed the room to a locked box she kept on the bureau. "I saw him in the Orb, just after the Raven arrived. It came on it's own I think, and tried to tell me Draco was in trouble."

"What'd he do this time?"

"He drank poison." She turned, met his eyes and trembled with worry. "Only it didn't take. Then he turned his wand on himself and spoke the killing curse. I didn't see how it ended, but I sense he's alive." Her eyes fell closed and Harry could see she was making a commendable effort not to cry.

When she opened them again she handed a small black box to Harry, a silver serpent adorning the lid.

"That will take you directly to Malfoy Manor, to the room where you'll find Draco. Now Go! *Hurry!*"

Harry Flipped open the port-key, but before he touched it his eyes landed on Sara. She was trembling, her hands clasped nervously and pressed against her chin. He put his arms around her. "I promise he'll be alright." He told her, stroking her hair, "Draco's too *stubborn* to die."

She gave a choked laugh. "I suppose that's true. Now *go*, Harry. Bring him back if you have to."

Harry gave her a reassuring smile and touched the key.

* * *

Harry's heart sank. Draco was sitting on the couch with his head in his hands, crying, with his long white hair all aglow in the light of the fire and spilling down to hide his face. Draco hadn't noticed Harry come into the room and now he stood there, stone-faced and uncertain, wondering what to do. When he finally found his voice it was quiet and small, apologetic. "Bad night, Malfoy?"

To his surprise, Draco wasn't startled at all by his sudden presence, but he quieted at once, turned his face away and withdrew a square of linen from his pocket. He discretely wiped his eyes. "I bet you think this is real funny, don't you Potter?"

"Not at all."

"So what are you doing here if you didn't come to say I told you so? You were right, Potter, that night

on the roof. I should have accepted your offer. I had no idea it would turn out the way it has."
Harry sat down on the couch beside Draco and sighed. "I came because I had a dream about you, that you were in some kind of trouble. Then Sara saw it in the Orb."

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"And she sent you instead of coming here herself I suppose."

"She said that you didn't want to see her."

"She was right."

Harry's voice fell to a whisper. "Why did you drink poison, Draco?"

Draco sighed tremendously and fell back into the cushions. "Because we all have to make sacrifices. Because you never did what I asked you to do. Not that I blame you completely, Potter, I mean it *is* a rather tall order, but it's come to its climax and I can't do what he wants anymore. Stealing books was one thing, but this is beyond comprehension."

"What is it? What has he asked you to do?"

"You *know* I can't tell you. All I can say is that I had to make a choice between two things of equal importance. I did that, but I can't live with the consequences, Potter, I'm not my father."

"I know you're not."

"At least if *he* tried to curse himself he wouldn't screw it up."

"Draco, there's nothing wrong with your ability. It didn't work because you didn't really want it to."

"Well *of course* I didn't want it to work! I'm not a head case, Potter." He sniffled as he watched the flames. "I think I'm having a nervous breakdown."

"Perhaps Madam Pomfrey-"

"I'm fine!"

"You don't *look* fine."

"You wouldn't either, if you knew tonight was your last chance for salvation, that the end of life as you knew it was imminent." Draco stood and walked to the few bottles of liquor on a shelf nearest the windows. "And who shows up but *Harry Potter*? Heroic rescuer, legend in his own time. *The Boy Who Wins*."

"Quidditch is over, Draco, now it's just life we're dealing with."

"And some life it is! You're one to talk, you walked into money twice over, everyone knows your name, and I hear there's soon to be a *Mrs. Potter*."

"Is that why you won't see her? I wish you would, she's miserable about it."

"That's not why."

"So you're not going to tell me?" Harry rose and went to where Draco was pouring drinks. "Perhaps if she knew your reasons-"

Draco slammed the bottle down. "I don't want to talk about Sara!"

"What *do* you want to talk about?" Harry took his drink and leaned against the wall with it. "I'm not here to get you upset; I'm here because I thought you might need a friend."

"Oh *bullshit* Potter! If we were friends then where have you been for 2 years? Why am I still a Death Eater? If my last name was *Weasley* things would be different, that's for sure! You never had any intentions of getting me out of this!"

"Is that what you think?" Harry raised his eyebrows in questioning. "And what do you mean *where have I been*? You told me not to contact you! I haven't told you anything so that there was nothing for Voldemort to get out of you. We've been working with The Order of the Phoenix and a few others, formulating a plan all this time. One doesn't just call the Dark Lord out blind."

"You've run out of time. It's days now, maybe even less."

"We're almost ready." Harry said with grave expression. "Stall."

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"I've been stalling for *weeks*." Draco lowered his eyes. "It's over. I have run out of options." He went to the sofa and got his wand from the floor. This he handed to Harry. "Kill me."

Harry looked at Draco and saw he was serious. "I can see Sara now. 'Yeah, he was fine when I got there, but then I killed him.' She'd hit me with lightning until I was fried."

"Just close your eyes and do it. It's the only way." Draco squeezed his eyes shut and waited.

"I will *not* kill you. Not today anyway." Draco looked at Harry and what he saw in Draco's ice-blue eyes made him hesitate.

"If you don't, you'll wish you had."

"We all have choices, Malfoy. I'm making mine. Let's see how you handle things."

"Don't say I didn't warn you." Draco said, but there was no humor in it. He raised his glass and touched it to Harry's. "To what we *used* to be."

* * *

Draco scanned the roof of the pizza shop and the surrounding block, dressed in a warm black cloak that blended perfectly with the night. He landed stealthily and without a sound in a shadowy corner of the roof.

He found Christina semi-conscious behind a small lean-to of cardboard and scraps of aluminum siding, asleep in a crevice beneath the ventilation ducts. Her clothes were damp, the breath rattled in and out of her lungs and she coughed every few seconds. The old boxes she slept on were wet with the day's rain and she wore a short-sleeved shirt with nothing over it to keep out the cold. She didn't seem to realize he was talking to her, calling her name and only moaned with exhaustion in response. He felt her head. She was burning with fever.

Lifting her into his arms, he mounted his broom and wrapped his cloak tight around her before

heading for home.

Nigel opened the door to the same guest room Christina had used earlier in the day and Draco carried her in and laid her on the immaculately made bed. The two middle-aged witches who did the cleaning bustled into the room and Nigel set a flannel nightgown on the foot, from the cache of things that had been bought for her. It was tasteful and looked warm, which pleased Draco a great deal. He was just about to leave so the maids (who's names he often forgot,) could change Christina's clothes, when he noticed her feet. She was wearing thick, new, white cotton socks. He thought she'd left without taking anything at all. But she did. She'd taken one pair of socks. Draco did not understand why this affected him the way it did, it pulled at something inside him, twisted his emotions. He turned and left the room.

There was a great blaze in the fireplace and his bed was already turned down. He longed to climb into it, but he had a feeling it was going to be a very long night. It was rounding on the one o'clock hour already. Tossing some powder into fire, Draco leaned forward and stuck his head into the flames.

"Professor!" He called and was surprised when Snape immediately appeared.

"Draco!" Snape seemed shocked - and delighted - to see his favorite student in his fireplace at one in the morning.

"Why aren't you in bed?" Draco wondered.

"Because I'm not tired."

"Why not?"

"Did you *really* stick your head in the fire *only* to find out why I'm still up?"

"No, since you ask. I need your help. A friend of mine is sick. I need a potion."

"So bring him here and let Madam Pomfrey have a look at him."

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"I can't," Draco said and hesitated. "She... she's a muggle."

Snape was stunned to silence. He simply knelt on the floor and stared at Draco's green head.

"She's really sick. She won't answer me, unless you count incoherent mumbling. She has a cold or something."

"Not likely," Snape answered and got to his feet. "I'll fly into Hogsmeade and apperate to London. I shouldn't be only twenty minutes."

"Thank you, sir. I'll be awaiting you."

* * *

Draco was stunned when Snape walked in, trailing a broom behind him. His hair was longer, but now had a rather flattering and definitive cut and it looked well taken care of. Shiny, clean - and sun streaked. His clothes were rumpled, but expensive, all in black. He was tan, and wearing a long black leather coat. He looked like a badass with money.

"Thank you for coming on such short notice, Professor," Draco said as he stood in the atrium, feet together, hands clasped before him.

He stood pin straight, but not stiff, and Snape knew Draco had been forced to maintain this proper gentleman's stance since he'd learned to walk. Snape's past with Lucius afforded him a view of Draco few others had and seeing his elegant pose in his elegant house only drew from Snape his greatest sympathy. Such finesse gave Draco a respectable air and a commanding presence, but to Severus it was a remnant of a joyless childhood. What Snape *didn't* know was that Draco clasped his hands so tightly that his knuckles were white with worry.

"May I take your coat?" Draco made no attempt to move and before he'd finished speaking Nigel was helping Snape out of his long leather jacket. "I like it by the way. It suits you well. Have you been shopping, Professor?"

"A gift from Sara. She said she saw it in Italy and knew I had to have it," Snape smiled. "I myself have never given much thought to frivolous attire, but I do rather like it."

"Sara has always had fine taste," Draco tried to grin and failed, "Except in her choice of husbands."

"She's not married yet, Draco. There's still time for you to change her mind."

"Don't you know Sara at all? There *is* no changing her mind. Besides, I know when to give up."

"One should never give up in the eleventh hour," Snape untied a heavy case from his broom. "After all, *someone* needs to put Potter in his place." He turned with the case in his hands, "Now where is the muggle?"

"Follow me," He said and led Snape up the stairs as his last comment resonated in Draco's mind. *Put Potter in his place.* He thought, *if Snape knew what was to come, he'd take it back.*

"She's in here."

Snape made his diagnosis within minutes and started rummaging around in his case, taking out stoppered bottles and one vial of what appeared to be dust. "She has pneumonia. It's a good thing you came to me, Draco. This girl is very ill."

"Will she be alright?" Draco asked too quickly as he hovered at her bedside, watching the Potions master with too much curiosity.

"She will, but it will take a few days." He measured out a dose of three different mixtures and turned toward the head of the bed. "Sit her up."

Draco climbed onto the covers and pulled her up to rest against him, cradled in his arm. "Christina," he whispered, "drink this. It will make you better."

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"Draco..." Her head rolled to the side and pressed against his chest. His heart started hammering and he gently brushed the hair from her face, realized what he was doing, and stopped. He took the potion

and put it to her lips.

"Drink, Christina." He whispered, "Professor Snape has brought you some medicine. You'll be well soon, I give you my word."

Snape watched Draco with profound curiosity. It was odd to see the image of Lucius Malfoy holding a sick muggle, with fear and concern in his cold, uncaring eyes. One thing came clear in that moment. Draco was *nothing* like his father.

Draco eased the girl back down on the bed and pulled the covers up to her chin. She was shivering with fever. "Professor? Could you stay with her awhile?" He pulled up his sleeve to display the emerging Dark Mark and then quickly covered it. "I have to go."

They shared a silent, but meaningful exchange and then Snape nodded, solemn and with dark acceptance.

"Don't let anything happen to her. And don't let her leave." Draco said and vanished.

* * *

It was night when Draco awoke in the grass outside his house. The stars blinked above him in a cloudless sky, a soft breeze rustled the leaves and brushed his skin, but he took no comfort in it. There was no relief anymore. Not in anything.

He managed to pull himself up, though he stumbled and moved too slowly as he made his way in and nearly crawled up the stairs to his room. Snape met him in the hallway and Draco held the wall to keep from falling.

"Malfoy!" Snape called out, "*What happened?* Do I have to remind you that you left on a *Sunday*?"

"What day is it?" Draco asked, his voice dry and hoarse.

Snape's expression turned concerned. "It's Friday."

"*Friday*." Draco said to himself, "I thought it was longer than that." He pushed off from the wall and staggered into his room, shut the door, and collapsed onto his bed. Snape was immediately hammering on the door.

"Draco!" He demanded through the polished wood, "You've been injured, and you *smell* like a mountain troll. Why haven't you changed clothes in all this time? Answer me! Where were you? *What happened?*"

He hadn't the energy to answer. He could only lie there, thinking about his time deep in the catacombs, in a place where even the darkest of creatures feared to go. He thought about what he'd learned there. That there was no hope left for him. No promise of redemption or solace. He no longer belonged to himself. At last he had given up.

Snape let his hand fall to his side and in the quiet he could hear crying coming from the other side of the door. The same horrible, wretched sound he'd heard from Sara in the past, the sort of sound that could only come from the totality of complete emotional devastation. He prepared to let himself in, thought better of it, and went to find Christina.

* * *

Moonlight shone through a long bank of windows and Draco awoke from a troubled sleep. He guessed he'd only slept for about an hour and didn't feel much better for it, though a strange calm had come over him. He felt numb, detached, and accepting of his fate. Tomorrow he would follow Voldemort's order, and after that, he would submit to the Dark Lord completely, for there were no other roads left to follow.

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The shower helped to revive him, but not enough to matter. He took no pleasure in the flow of warm water as he normally would and went about washing mechanically and with little thought. Draco's entire body pained him, inside and out, and he felt as if he'd been within an inch of death. Perhaps he had, over and over again.

What he *did* take comfort in was his pajamas, cool and soft against his skin in the warmth of the room. He stoked the fire with his wand, prodding it, charming it higher and higher until there was a roaring blaze in the fireplace. Then he went to a box he had hidden in the bureau and removed a tiny ring, alive with diamonds that shone with dramatic lavender brilliance. It was something he hadn't looked at in a long time. It was not in his manner to torture himself with tangible memories, but now he put the little ring around his neck with Sara's Amigon and this also comforted him. The gold chain slipped easily back under his shirt as he pressed the ring and the amulet close against him, letting his eyes slip closed to savor the warm familiarity of them.

He needed her now, so much even he couldn't comprehend the depth of it. And he needed Potter, too. He would never say so out loud, but the night Harry had come to him, the night he'd tried to swallow poison, was the best night he'd had in years. He felt relief with Potter's presence, he felt safe, like Voldemort couldn't get to him while Draco was in his company. The immense vulnerability he lived with everyday just evaporated with the weight of his burden and he felt real again, part of something more profound and integral than this evil, loathsome existence. He'd felt alive with renewed hope and he hated Harry for it. There were plans being laid, not just by Harry and his idiot friends, but by an order of powerful wizards, headed by Dumbledore and all primed for an imminent war. One that was to start soon after Harry and Sara's wedding. That was just over 2 weeks, so close he could almost taste his freedom, but it wasn't soon enough. He had his orders, and 24 hours to carry them out.

There was a soft knock at the door. It opened a crack, and then Cristina leaned her head in with a reluctant smile. "Draco." She said, "Severus said you were back. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

To Draco, her smile was like a ray of light. "Come in." He said. "Forgive me if I remain where I am."

"Don't trouble yourself." She closed the door and hurried over to the other side of the bed, which

Draco was facing. "May I?"

"Certainly."

She climbed onto the coverlet. "You were gone so long! We were worried, everyone was."

Draco would have blushed if he had any color left in his face. "I was worried about you, too, actually."

He managed a small smile, "What were you thinking? You left the jumper and decided to spend the night in the cold and the rain when you had a mansion at your disposal. I hate to say it, but you suck at decision making."

Christina laughed and he noticed how different she looked. "You got your hair cut. And you're looking a little healthier."

"Yes, Charles has been taking very good care of me."

"Who the hell is Charles?"

"Your cook."

Draco considered this for a moment and found he had no idea what the man's name was. "Oh."

Christina's eyes had settled on the frame that had adorned Draco's bedside since Hogwarts. "Is she your sister?"

Draco brought the picture forward with aching arms. His face darkened as he looked at it. "No."

"She's beautiful." Christina said, gingerly taking the heavy frame from his hand.

"That she is." He sighed.

"Is she your wife?" She asked with caution.

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"We were once friends." He answered. "She killed my father."

Christina was thunderstruck, stuttering over a reply that never came.

"She had cause, of course, but she had other options. She never discussed it with me. She betrayed me."

"I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter anymore." Draco took the frame and placed it back where it was, carefully arranging it for the perfect vantage point.

"Why do you keep it there if you don't mind me asking, if it brings about such painful memories?"

"Because the night that picture was taken was the happiest night of my life."

"You were in love with her."

Draco grew quiet for a moment, wondering why he felt such desire to answer her questions, to brush aside the cobwebs and let all the bats out of the attic. She was a homeless muggle he'd found on the street. He hardly knew her at all, but he found he wanted to tell her even more than she wanted to know. "There are no words to describe how I felt about Sara. I loved her the way people love each other in Shakespeare's books. It consumed me completely; day and night I thought of Sara, I heard her voice in my dreams. *Everything* reminded me of her."

"But she didn't return your feelings."

"Actually, she did. Not completely, but Sara became my closest friend. She was the first person to ever really get to know me. She was able to reach me on a deeper level. Yes, she did love me."

"What happened?"

"She was *in* love with someone else."

"I'm sorry." She said again and reached across the bed to take his hand. "If it's any consolation, I've always believed that everything happens for a reason."

Struck by the gesture, Draco smiled and wrapped his fingers around hers. It had been so long since he had been affectionately touched by another human being he'd almost forgotten how nice it could be. "I hope you're right." He sighed. "Christina? I know that this is going to sound crazy, but would you stay with me until I fall asleep?"

"Of course I will." She gave him a concerned smile, "I can see you're upset about something."

"I wish I could tell you everything." He said as she put out the candle and climbed under the blankets.

"But even if I did, it wouldn't change anything."

"What do you mean?"

"I have to do something tomorrow, something unimaginable. I've tried to get out of it, but it's no use. I may or may not come back, so I wanted you to know that you can stay here as long as you'd like. I want you to. Not out of charity, but because after tomorrow you'll be the only friend I've got."

"What do you mean you might not come back? It's none of my business, but where are you going?"

"Probably straight to Hell."

"Draco, you're shaking."

"I've never been so scared in my life."

Christina moved gently across the bed and wrapped her arms around him in the darkness. Draco melted into the embrace, as all his pent up emotion flooded him and he clung to her as she rhythmically brushed her fingers through his hair. "Whatever you do," she whispered, "I'll never judge you."

* * *

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Harry awoke to the bright morning sunshine with an anxiety that ate at him. He'd dreamt again of Malfoy, though Sara was humming away in the shower instead of running for the Orb, which put him at ease. She always seemed to know what Draco was feeling. Still, something lingered and it finally drove him out of bed. His mind's eye landed on a little gold box in the shape of a clam.

"Come, Hedwig." He said and hurried to the house next door in his pajamas and barefoot, the owl

looking strange riding along on his shoulder. Harry was walking too fast, but had to fight the urge to run. The master suite seemed miles away and Harry picked up the pace. Finally, he was standing in front of the shelf.

He carried the item to the desk and wrote a quick note.

Malfoy,

Something told me you needed this.

H.P.

Making sure the lid was tightly closed, Harry packed it in a small shipping carton, enclosed the letter, and watched as Hedwig flew off with it. "Hurry!" He told her, "Fly like the wind and don't stop for anything."

He found Sara dressed for the day and looking lovely when he re-entered the cottage with his hair standing up straight on one side and his nightclothes all askew. She was in a splendid mood and smiled enormously when she saw him. "Happy birthday, Harry!"

"Thanks!"

"I've started the breakfast and Ron and Hermione should be here any minute."

"Where are you going?"

"To pick up my wedding dress." She grinned, "And we need a few last minute things for the party."

"Well can't you go later?"

"No Harry. I won't be long and I don't want to stick the two of them with setting up while I'm out shopping. It's best to go now, even if I miss breakfast."

"Alright then." He smiled, "I'll see you soon."

He kissed her and she threw her arms around his neck. "I can't believe you're twenty! It's seems like yesterday that we were in school and here we are, grown-ups already."

"We've got the rest of our lives ahead of us, Sara. This is just the beginning." Dread struck him like a bolt of lightning and his face turned suddenly pale.

"What is it?"

"Nothing." He tried to smile, "I love you, my future Mrs. Potter. You can't leave me alone on my birthday, so hurry back to me, okay?"

Sara smiled with reassurance. "I will, Harry. I promise."

He smiled and waved as she disappeared through the door, stopping to blow him a kiss from the front step. Then she was gone. Harry returned to the kitchen to tend to his birthday breakfast.

* * *

Christina slept like an angel, with her soft sable hair slipping down the pillows behind her, lost in a sea of Draco's black silk pajamas and blankets. Her knees were bent as she lay on her side facing his half of the bed, her hand curled under her chin. Draco bent and kissed her cheek before Hedwig flew in through the window.

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Draco thought Harry must have lost his mind, sending his owl straight to Draco's house and *carrying a package* no less! Was Potter trying to get him a month in the catacombs? Stealthily he opened it, careful not to wake Christina with the chaos of crinkling paper.

Draco,

Something told me you needed this.

H.P.

It was his memory. The little pensieve he'd left with Harry the very night he'd become a Death Eater. He'd forgotten all about it and now here it was on this strangest of days. Something more to torment him, or maybe comfort him in his time of trial. After only a moment's hesitation, he pulled his wand from the pocket of his jeans and returned the mist to its rightful place.

A quick glance at his watch told Draco that time was running short and he had to be on his way or risk missing Voldemort's deadline. He would be followed every step of the way, of this he was certain, and if it appeared he was slacking then back to catacombs he would go for a little reminder of duty. He couldn't even bear the thought of it. Never, in the year he had spent in the dark depths, had it been so cruel or so constant as it had this past week. Voldemort had become so *relentless* with his 'lessons' that Draco was sure he wouldn't make it through another round with his sanity intact. He thought of Neville Longbottom's parents, tortured to madness by Death Eaters, and longed for such a release. If he were mad, he could spend his days at St. Mungo's instead of under Voldemort's boot.

Letting himself out of the room in silence, Draco made his way down to the car, which was waiting as he'd requested. He sat in the back with the partition raised, alone with his thoughts. He saw himself dancing with Sara, and then sitting on a bench in the frozen night, looking at her, kissing her for real, not the little friendly kisses she'd given him occasionally, but the kind of kiss that made the world go away. He'd loved her so completely then, and still did to this very day.

Diagon Alley was only a twenty minute ride from home and he instructed the driver to wait with the motor running before disappearing into The Leaky Cauldron. There were a few people inside, most eating breakfast at out of the way tables and Draco ignored all of them. He kept his eyes on the back wall and went straight to the entrance to Diagon Alley.

He wasn't surprised to see the streets jammed with wizards on a sunny, warm Saturday morning, bustling about, shopping in groups or wandering alone. He waded into their midst, passing unnoticed in jeans and a dark green cotton shirt. His walk down the hill that night had taught him not to dress for business (which was the way he *always* dressed) if he wanted to slip by, unseen, to blend with everyone else. He wasn't in the mood to talk to old acquaintances of his father's or friends from school.

He just needed another vial of poison and then he could get out of there.

And that's when it happened, right there on the crowded walk, along the crowded street, someone grabbed his arm and swung him around. It was Sara.

"Malfoy!" She grinned, "I saw you pass and I just *had* to see you!"

Draco stood in dumb shock, not knowing what to say and taken so off his guard that he only stuttered. It had been such a long time since they'd stood face to face and he was suddenly overcome with emotion. He smiled awkwardly. "Sara." He finally managed.

"You look absolutely miserable! Won't you talk to me about it?" She urged, concern in her pretty violet-blue eyes, "Look, I know you've been avoiding me, but now here we are. Now you can tell me why."

"I'm a Death Eater, Sara." He told her, "You know I wanted to see you, but it would have been better if you had *never* come back. I never wanted you to see this side of me."

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"Harry told me everything, you know. Whatever it is you have to do, Draco, we all know that it's against your will."

"I truly hope so." He lifted one aching arm and ran his fingers through her beautiful long hair, and then pressed his hand against her face for the last time.

Sara's voice was barely above a whisper. "Draco, you look like you're about to cry."

"I feel like crying." He pulled her closer and kissed her, not with physical passion, but from the heart and Sara knew the difference. She did not pull away. It was *real*, and tinged with finality.

Finally, he wrapped her in a tight embrace. His eyes slipped closed, savoring the nearness of her, the smell of her perfume, the sensation of her breath on his skin, the feel of her arms around him.

"I love you, Draco. Let me help you."

"There is no help for me." He kissed her hair, "Just know that what I do today I do out of cowardice and fear. Always remember that I love you more than you could ever know." He glanced into the crowd and found at least two of Voldemort's spies were watching him closely. "Sara, I'll love you until the day I die."

Tears stood in his eyes as he drew his wand. "*Avada Kedavra*." He whispered as his eyes slipped shut and the tears fell. He did not look at her, only turned away as quick as he could and hurried away, hearing the soft gasp of her falling to the ground.

Behind him he heard the cries of passers-by, calling for help and Draco walked faster, wiping his face with his hands. He was still holding his wand and shoved it back in his pocket. He wanted to run away, not just out of Diagon Alley, but clean out of London, through the tunnel and across half of Europe. He couldn't bring himself to look back at the ring of concerned wizards he knew would be standing around her body.

Setting his sights straight at the ground, Draco hurried back to his car and choked out one request for his driver. "*Take me home*." He said.

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29. Much Ado about Malfoy

The world swam for an instant and Snape suddenly remembered to breathe. The scene unfolding before his eyes was impossible, surreal, and there was a part of him that refused to accept it. It simply could not be.

St. Mungo's was a noisy blur behind him, but his full attention was fixed on the hospital bed nearest the wall. Sara was pale. As pale as could be, and her eyes were dark and sunken as she slept. In a chair by her side was Potter, her hand held in both of his. Harry bowed his head to hide his eyes.

On Sara's other side stood Hermione, smoothing Sara's hair back from her face and crying silently.

Weasley paced before the windows, glancing up at the bed with every pass, his slow footfalls were the only sound inside the room. The Headmaster sat slumped in a chair by the foot, stroking his beard in contemplation. He looked positively ill and the light had gone from his eyes. He watched the scene as Snape did, with utter disbelief.

No one greeted him at first as he stood in the doorway. No one spoke or even looked up. Finally, Minerva appeared at his side.

"Severus, it's the worst of the Unforgivable Curses." She said in a hush, pulling him back into the hall.

"They've only just come back with the tests and the news is grave, I'm sorry to say."

"*What?*" He asked as his heart thundered in his chest. "*What did they say?*"

"The curse was incomplete. A number of things could have happened, but it didn't kill her. However, it still did the intended damage."

"Damage?"

"She'll die if we don't find the person responsible and convince him to reverse the curse."

"*How long?*"

"It's not known exactly. All we *do* know is that her condition continues to worsen. They're saying she won't live through the night." McGonagall paused to study the floor and Snape turned away, trying to absorb his horror. He couldn't imagine the world without Sara. A tentative hand touched his arm. "I know what a shock this is." She told him, "Especially for you, Severus."

He nodded his thanks with downcast eyes and followed her back into the room.

Hermione was studying Sara's bejeweled hand and her puzzlement was evident. Severus expected her to address the room at any moment and he wasn't kept waiting long.

"It had to be someone she trusted." Hermione said, "She's wearing the Orb of Arassel on her finger.

She wasn't frightened *at all*."

Ron nodded slowly. "Exactly."

"I *know* who it was." Harry said, turning. His eyes were distant and his voice was quiet and shattered.

"It was Draco Malfoy."

Snape sneered at Harry's back. "How do you *know* it was Draco?"

"I went to Malfoy Manor." He said, "Sara looked in the Orb and saw him drink poison." Harry stopped and took a deep breath. "When I arrived he told me that Voldemort had given him an order that he would rather die than carry out. He said that if I didn't kill him I'd be sorry." Harry lowered his eyes to Sara's listless form. "He was right."

Everyone looked at each other at once. Ron spoke and their eyes turned to him.

"*Malfoy!*? You've got to be kidding! Is there *nothing* sacred?" Ron shouted, and then paced a few steps as he considered it, "It makes perfect sense. Anyone who could manage to surprise Sara had to be someone she didn't suspect and Malfoy fits *that* bill. That's what *I* say."

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Harry sat with her hand in his, his face painted with indescribable agony, his eyes never left her face. He waited for her to flutter an eyelid, something, *anything*. There was no movement except the slow rise and fall of her chest. He felt sick.

"The gold snake." Harry said under his breath.

"He's a snake alright, but I never thought he'd do *anything* like this." Ron sighed and Hermione placed a comforting hand on Harry's shoulder.

"The serpent arm band I gave her 7th year." He whispered. "I charmed it to strike anyone who would do her harm. It struck at Malfoy."

"Then you did the charm *wrong*, Potter." Snape growled, "I happen to know that Draco is quite fond of Sara."

Ron spun on him, angry. "Do you have to insult him? Even *now*? It's *plain* that Malfoy cursed Sara, no matter *how* he feels about her!"

"It doesn't make sense." Harry said, "He *loves* Sara."

"I agree." said Hermione. "It doesn't make sense, but we don't know what Voldemort threatened him with."

Harry startled them all by standing and bellowing his reply, his brow was furrowed with anger and his fists were clenched, the knuckles white. "I *don't* care what Voldemort threatened him with! What's a *threat* compared to murder? *He tried to kill her!*"

"What are you going to do, Harry?" Ron whispered, worried about his friend's state of mind.

"I'm going to make him *pay*." Harry scowled, "As soon as he takes his *curse* off Sara." He smoothed the hair away from Sara's face, kissed her gently, and stormed out of the room without a word, and without meeting anyone's eyes. Hermione and Ron ran after him, but couldn't catch up. Harry would not respond to their calls as they raced through the hospital and into the London streets, he seemed not even to hear them, and finally Harry hailed a cab and it zipped off into traffic. Hermione and Ron were stunned at first, then decided it would be best if they split up anyway. Ron decided to check the pubs between Draco's house and Diagon Alley, and Hermione was headed for Diagon Alley itself.

* * *

It sounded like an explosion when Harry blew the door in and stormed through Draco's house in a rage. "*Malfoy!*" he shouted with the promise of challenge, but there was no response. Harry shoved the flustered servants aside and made his way toward the back of the second story, smashing everything in his path, his pace furious and his eyes full of murderous intent.

Finally, he came to Draco's bedroom and Harry kicked in the door, his wand held out in a trembling hand and focused on the figure standing beside the bed. She cried out in surprise and fear, and then appeared confused.

"Why are you pointing a stick at me?" she asked.

Realizing she was a muggle, Harry lowered his arm and took a few deliberate steps into the room.

"*Where is he?*" he seethed. "*Where is the bastard!*"

"He left." She said, her voice small and hesitant. His eyes blazed with terrifying intensity and what she saw there was disturbing. His presence was immense and she cowered before his anger. "Whatever he did, I *swear* he didn't mean it."

Glancing around the room, Harry's eyes landed on a picture frame and his countenance fractured.

Something seemed to just break and fall away and in this moment Christina saw such sadness come over him that her heart nearly cried out with sympathy. His eyes were fixed on the photo beside the bed. He lifted it with delicate, trembling hands and for several moments he said nothing. Christina was sure he was going to cry, but he didn't. He brushed a thumb over Sara's smiling image.

"Do you know her?" She whispered, afraid to speak out loud.

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"We were getting married." He replied, never taking his eyes off the picture, "In two weeks."

Christina closed her eyes and swallowed the dread that loomed up in her throat. "Why do you speak in the *past tense*?"

"Because she's dying." Harry told her, his voice growing stronger as his anger returned, "He tried to kill her."

"He said she was his closest friend!" Christina told him, unable to believe what she'd heard. "He said he *loved* her!"

Suddenly Harry came to life, knocking Christina back onto the bed as his arm came down hard, the frame smashing violently against the corner of the stand. Broken shards crashed to the floor in a

frightening confusion of motion and clamor. Harry's arm came back again and he flung the ruined frame at the wall where it knocked over a beautiful vase and both crashed to the floor in a spray of tinkling glass. He faced Christina, who shrank from him. "*Where is he!*"

"I don't know."

"She'll die if I don't find him." He said, his eyes never leaving hers. "He did something to her that only he knows how to undo. If you know where he is and you don't tell me *right now*, then she dies by your hand as well."

Christina stood, nervous, but unafraid. "He was upset when he was here." She told him, "He had been crying, it was obvious, and was beyond reach. He wouldn't answer my questions. I tried to touch him and he pushed me away."

"But where did he *go*?"

"The only thing he said to me," she wrung her hands at the thought, "was that he desperately wanted to die. Then he left."

"How long ago?"

"I'm not sure. I tried to follow him, but then something happened and I woke up on the front walk. He was long gone by then." Heart wrenching desperation radiated from him and Christina laid a comforting hand on Harry's arm. "Tell me your name."

"Harry Potter."

"I'm Christina Safford, Harry, and I don't know how much help I could be to you."

"Just wait for him here. If he comes back, tell him what I've told you. He has precious few hours. She's at the hospital. He knows which one."

"What will happen to him there?"

"*He'll answer to me.*"

Christina nodded in compliance and was glad when Harry finally left the room. She actually *felt* his departure and thought that he was the most intimidating person she'd ever met, but he was also nonthreatening and her heart went out to him. Christina sank back down on the bed. *Draco*, she thought, *what have you done?*

* * *

"Any luck?" Ron asked with a sigh as they met on the walk outside The Leaky Cauldron. He was sweating and out of breath, his jumper thrown over one shoulder.

"Not really." Hermione frowned. "Tom said he saw Malfoy come and go this morning and said he looked upset on his way out, but that doesn't help us now."

"I hope *I'm* the one that finds him." Ron confided, "I'll wring his bloody neck for what he did."

"I just hope it isn't *Harry* who finds him first." Hermione sighed and hailed a cab, "I think he'd probably kill Malfoy before we can get him back to the hospital."

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"Yeah," Ron agreed, "And then he'd wind up in Azkaban for sure."

Silently, they slid onto the seat and headed for the area of The Phantom. With no other ideas, it was a place to look. None of them knew where Draco would go and already more than an hour had passed since they'd lost Harry on the street. Now here they were with absolutely nothing to go on.

Hermione looked to Ron with desperate eyes. "You know, it's times like this when you realize how *little* you know about a person."

"Tell me about it. I don't know *anything* about Malfoy. Nothing of any use, anyway."

"I always thought I had him figured out. I thought he was unpredictable to an extent, but consistent. Malfoy could always be counted upon to react a certain way. You'd think he'd be waiting there for Harry, just so he could see the devastation he'd caused. Rub it in a little, then run away like the coward he is. But he wasn't and I'm clueless."

"Think, Hermione. If we were Malfoy, where would we go?"

"*Home*" She said and silence fell between them. The cab made a left and Hermione looked back to Ron. "He'd want his *father* to protect him. He knows half of the wizarding world will come down on him after what he's done."

"Too bad Lucius Malfoy's *dead*. Now what?"

"I don't know. Malfoy Manor is unplotable. You have to know where it is, so that leaves *us* out. I guess we just go to the Phantom. When we don't find him we'll go to his house. Maybe we'll even find Harry there."

"The Phantom is worth a shot, even at lunchtime. It's better than wandering aimlessly."

"I feel so helpless, Ron. I mean, *Sara*..."

"I know, Hermione." Ron sighed. "Me too."

* * *

Malfoy Manor was empty and dark, its echoes a testament to its vacancy. Draco was not here. He wasn't anywhere and Harry was quickly losing hope of finding him. The realization that he would lose Sara tonight left Harry with a desperation he could hardly control. It sought to overwhelm him, drive him mad until he felt this pain no longer.

Harry opened the lid of the little box Sara had given him, touched the silver snake inside and placed it back on the dresser. The little bedroom he shared with Sara was a shambles. Discarded shoes littered the floor, along with three shirts Sara had decided didn't work with her outfit in her hurry to dress this morning. If only he'd demanded that she stay and have breakfast... maybe everything would have turned out differently. He knew he should be thankful Sara was still alive after the Killing Curse. He knew that she lived, that the spell went wrong, because Malfoy didn't really want to kill her, but his

anger, his *agony*, made it impossible to feel much else. He couldn't fathom what Draco had been thinking when he'd turned his wand on Sara and, surprisingly, he didn't care why. Harry wanted only to inflict unimaginable physical pain on him, but the satisfaction that accompanied the thought frightened him. Harry thought he was capable of beating Draco Malfoy to death with his bare hands. As Harry ventured through the cottage, overcome with an intense desire to unleash his wrath, his eyes landed on the chair he had sat in at breakfast this morning. Self loathing seeped through him like poison and suddenly the chair was smashing against the wall, then clamoring to the floor, broken, and on its side. Coming to his senses, Harry stormed out of the cottage and took blindly to the path that led to the house. He didn't know what to do. His need for revenge was pressing, Malfoy had disappeared, and Sara silently slipped away as he wasted time. A tiny voice of reason remained in his thoughts, but it was crushed by the enormity of his anger. He threw open the doors to the house and went in.

* * *

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Draco lay in the grass on the hillside behind his house, his eyes closed against the sun. The last day of July was always hot, but the heat of the day did nothing to warm the coldness inside him. It crept through his veins like frost. In his mind a scene replayed over and over, driving him mad with grief, his eyes were wet and dripped down into his hair. He remembered Sara on a cold winter night, the warmth that radiated from her as he held her close to him, his arms around her and nothing else in the world. Only the nearness of her as she kissed him and Draco could still feel the sensation of it. He still felt the emotion that had flooded him then and the way he never wanted to let go of her. Gradually, a heat seeped through his body, melting away the soft invasion of numbness. It centered on his chest and Draco reached under his shirt, withdrawing the Amidon which he had worn for so long that he'd forgotten all about it. It glowed bright red, which it had never done before, and was warm to the touch. His mind swam with the possibilities. *How could it be?* He wondered as he watched the swirling amulet. *It should be black by now.* Then it dawned on him. Wand still clutched absently in his hand, Draco got to his feet.

* * *

Snape arrived at St. Mungo's around three, hours after he had left to join the search. He spotted Dumbledore, just emerging from Sara's room as he walked with quickened pace down the noisy, crowded corridor.

"Ah, Severus! I thought that was you." The Headmaster said with little spark. "Come quickly, I've been waiting for news for hours, a bit impatiently I might add."

"I'm sorry to say, but there is no news. I went to Malfoy Manor first thing, but I found no trace of him there and I didn't dare try to enter without knowing how. I rang the bell and looked in the windows, but there was nothing. I visited several of my old students, hoping he might have turned to one of his school friends, but that was also wrong. I just came from Draco's house."

"Nothing there either, I suppose?"

"Just his muggle friend Christina, who was badly frightened and half the house was smashed in the hallways. It seems Potter showed up there, *kicked* in the front doors, *threatened* the help and left a path of destruction as he barged through Draco's house in a *fit of rage*. He nearly scared the poor girl half to death!"

Dumbledore sighed. "Well Severus, I'm sure Harry didn't mean to frighten any innocent party."

"He should have more sense than that in *my* opinion. If you ask me we never should have allowed Potter to look for Draco. He's far too emotional. He's a loose cannon, he could go off without warning."

"I agree, yes, you're right of course." Dumbledore took a deep breath and exhaled as his shoulders slumped. "Although I must say that right now we need every pair of eyes we've got."

A lone figure emerged from the madness further down the hallway and walked slowly forward, dazed, as if he was not sure where he was and didn't care. In his hand he held his wand. He was rumpled and grass clung to his clothes. His eyes were bright red and bloodshot. His face blotchy and pale.

The two men at the door fell silent as they watched his approach. Neither could believe what they were seeing. The answer to their prayers had wandered in of his own accord. Snape opened his mouth to speak, but Dumbledore stayed him. Draco passed them without even a glance, just went in and walked to Sara's bedside, where he finally stopped. He seemed totally unaware of his surroundings, or the wand he held. At this point, Dumbledore took his hand from Snape's arm and gave him a brief, resigned nod.

Severus was nervous as he came to stand behind Draco. He moved to place a hand on the boy's shoulder, but then thought better of it. He spoke with a gentle voice, terrified of startling him. "*Reverse the curse.*"

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Draco took no notice of Snape. He took the little purple ring from the necklace he wore under his shirt and took Sara's hand. His choked whisper was barely discernable, but those who watched with solemn faces understood perfectly. "*Thanks for everything.*" He said and bent to kiss her face, he kissed the hand he held. Drops of wetness fell into her hair, onto her listless fingers. Severus sighed, wishing he'd never had to see Draco Malfoy cry. The sight at this moment was nearly more than he could bear. He gently moved Draco's wand arm to point at the bed and said the words, which were repeated, with anguish, by Draco.

Sara's eyes fluttered open and a little color returned to her pale face as she took in the ceiling, then turned her head toward the source of the strangled sobs she heard beside her. Sara smiled and took his

hand. "Draco." She said, "You got my message,"

As if some sea of wretchedness burst forth inside him, Malfoy broke down completely as he collapsed onto the bed and Sara pulled herself up to embrace him with fierce emotion. His arms went around her as she stroked his hair and Sara whispered things only he could hear.

Sensing that there was no danger to Sara, Snape rejoined Dumbledore, who hadn't ventured far inside, and shut the door behind him.

"I have to admit, Severus, I'm surprised. It seems I should have more faith in our young Mr. Malfoy. His father he is not."

"I doubted him myself, Headmaster." Severus admitted with a sigh.

"I should find Harry." Albus decided, "I imagine he'll want to know his bride is, well, *not dead*."

* * *

Harry stood with the wind tossing his hair back from his face, his illustrious scar distinct and unmistakable. His face was dry and his eyes tragic as he looked down at the waves crashing white against the rocks. He had taken off his glasses and now held them in his hands, wishing he was a weaker person.

A soft, wise voice came from beside him. "Are you planning to jump, Harry?"

Harry was quiet a moment, his eyes fixed on the surf below. "I can't."

"I see." Dumbledore said, "And why do you think that is?"

"I don't know, sir." He whispered.

"It's because you're a *Gryffindor*, Harry. And I assure you, there are no cowards in *that* house."

Harry almost smiled and looked up at the sky.

"Come." Dumbledore took Harry's arm and guided him away from the edge. "You are needed now."

Harry turned and stepped away, then stopped and faced the Headmaster, the agony burning in his expression. "I can't watch her die, Professor. I can't do it."

Dumbledore smiled, the light having returned to his eyes "Harry, Draco Malfoy has been found."

Harry blinked in abject disbelief, and then his eyes became animate. "Did he reverse it?" Harry asked on the edge of elation, waiting in limbo to hear the reply.

"Sara is awake, yes."

"Is she *alright*?"

"She'll be fine in a few days. She needs some rest, but otherwise she's just fine."

"*Accio broomstick!*" Harry yelled and within moments the gold flash of his Lightning Mach 2 was in his hands and he was gone, shooting through the sky toward London.

"We *do* have a port-key." Dumbledore told the empty terrace.

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Back inside Dumbledore found Ron and Hermione hard at work repairing the furnishings. He sighed for the second time when he saw what Harry had done to the beautiful new house. *Everything* was smashed. Tables, chairs, vases of flowers lay in ruins from the front entrance to the back doors in a path of fury. Heavy oak armoires lay face down in the dining room where pieces of shattered china dusted the hardwood. The dishes, of course, were a total loss. In the front hall a grandfather clock rested on its back, its pendulum stopped. The drapes had been torn from the windows. Only the rugs remained unharmed. Drawing his wand, he set to work at once. "*Reparo*" he said with a long sigh. He would have to leave the smaller stuff to Ron and Hermione. It did not seem a good idea to leave Harry alone in a small room with Severus Snape and Draco Malfoy.

* * *

Sara was sitting up, reclined against the back of the hospital bed when Harry came into the room, out of breath from running. He smiled whole-heartedly and dropped his broom in the walkway.

Sara threw back the covers and climbed onto her feet. She was in pain and unsteady and Harry threw his arms around her before she'd even gained her footing. "You're *alive*!" He breathed relief, pulling her closer. It was surreal to hear her voice, to feel her hands press against his back; for it meant it was all true. He hadn't dared to believe it until he saw her with his own eyes.

"Didn't I promise never to leave you again?" Sara grinned with affection. "I'll be just fine, Harry."

Harry's happiness faded when he saw Malfoy for the first time, sitting in a chair on the far side of the room and staring absently at them. His features were red-rimmed from hours and hours of misery and in his hand he held a rumpled handkerchief, forgotten. He didn't seem to notice that Harry's dark and furious eyes were trained on him or that Harry had released Sara and now drew his wand.

"*Easy Potter*." Snape warned, "He's here of his own accord."

"Get up." Harry ordered as he took slow, deliberate steps around the bed, ignoring Snape's words. Malfoy seemed barely to hear, but his eyes turned to Harry and his lip trembled as if he meant to speak. He said nothing.

"I said *GET UP!*" Harry shouted and grabbed Draco with both hands, tearing him out of the chair and Malfoy came to his feet with a startled gasp. Harry was shaking with rage but found himself unable to do Sara's attacker any real harm. His muscles twitched, his heart slammed against his ribcage as adrenaline ripped through his veins, but he only stood there with Malfoy's shirt in his hands, restraining him from collapsing back into his chair.

"*Potter!*" Snape loudly cautioned, "Must I remind you this is a *hospital*!"

Back in bed, Sara twisted the blanket's edge with nervous hands. "*Harry*." She pleaded, "Harry, for pity's sake! *Look* at him!"

Harry did. As much as he wanted to unleash his anger, tear Malfoy apart in pure rage, he could do no such thing. Draco was mostly absent and Harry wanted him to *fight back*. The sniveling wretch he

held upright would collapse if he let go. This simply would not do. Harry was invaded by unwelcome sympathy, coating his raw nerves and temporarily sating his fury.

"Well Malfoy?" He fumed, "What do you have to say for yourself?"

Draco said nothing.

"You *will* speak, understand me well. You'll speak even if I have to beat it out of you. And you can be certain it would be *my pleasure*." Harry shoved Draco violently back into his chair and turned to the bed.

"Did he tell you?"

"No," Sara sighed, "but I know why he did it. I divined it from him."

"What did you see? Tell why he would turn his wand on you, Sara. I demand to know."

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"You *know* I can't. Let Malfoy explain himself, Harry, just don't be so unkind to him. *He had no choice*. I can honestly say that, had I been in his shoes, I would have done the same thing."

"Not likely."

"Don't be so quick to judge! Draco is not the criminal here. You know who is, and you can take it out on *him* soon enough."

Snape, whose presence Harry had forgotten, had his say as well. "I agree, Potter. I *do* understand what you're thinking right now," his hand rose to linger about his throat, "but we all know that Draco is an unwilling pawn in a *much larger* game. He had no desire to cause Sara harm. As you can see, even she has forgiven him."

Harry's hands curled into fists, his wand pointed absently at nothing. "I'll *never* forgive him! I'll *kill* him before I forgive him!"

A voice like aged parchment drifted across the room and Dumbledore stood still in the doorway. "You won't be killing *anyone*, Harry. Not today at least." He walked toward the bed, his eyes serious, but compassionate. "Anger is weakness. You'd do well to remember that."

"You're wrong!" Harry shouted. Dumbledore appeared to have expected nothing less, but both Sara and Snape looked to him, shocked by his disrespect. "You want to know what weakness is? It's allowing yourself to be controlled by another, trying to kill innocent people because you haven't got the courage to refuse. *That's weakness*."

Draco's eyes slipped closed; his face a mask of anguish.

"He'll die in Azkaban." Harry swore. "I'll make sure of *that*"

Sara sat bolt upright. "He *will not*!"

"*Stay out of it!*" Harry bellowed and Sara flinched. He immediately lowered his voice. "He'll pay for what he did to you, Sara. I swear on my life he will."

A small voice caused every head to turn and Harry spun on his heel. "Take me to Azkaban." Draco said, his eyes locked on the empty wall.

Harry was surprised to hear Malfoy speak, for he appeared catatonic. He sneered, his reply vicious.

"You're not *good enough* for the likes of Azkaban."

Draco's empty stare found the face before him. "*Help me, Harry.*" He whispered, and then fell silent again, his eyes having drifted back to the wall.

"Come out of your little dream world, Malfoy. You can't hide from what you've done. You *will* answer to me or you'll *find out* how it feels to be cursed." Harry threatened and a long moment passed, the tension in the room as thick as London fog, and when Draco said nothing Harry raised his arm with satisfied determination. He had no sooner begun the curse when a searing pain ripped through his body and slammed him hard into the wall. Harry fell to the floor and sat up, clutching his chest with wide eyes. Faint tremors shook the room and a streak of crimson replaced the black in Sara's hair.

"He's *knows* how it feels to be cursed!" She told him, her brow creased with anger, "He's felt enough curses for a *hundred* lifetimes!" Sara threw back the covers and turned to face him fully, the red in her hair receding as she regained her composure. "No one should have to know what he knows, Harry, and I *won't* let you hurt him."

Harry's anger rose at having been hit by lightning. Quickly, he climbed to his feet, ignoring the pain that echoed through him and shoved one hand in his pocket. With the other he grabbed Draco's arm and yanked him to his feet. He flipped open the gold box and touched the key.

* * *

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Harry shoved Malfoy by his shirtsleeve after practically dragging him from the cottage and into the labyrinth beneath the house. Draco stumbled into the small room where Nikolae now lay asleep in an exquisitely carved stone sarcophagus which Harry had made especially for him. Draco caught himself on the far wall and slumped to the floor. His eyes closed.

"I'll deal with you later." Harry said and sealed the door on him. He jogged back to the cottage and grabbed some of Sara's things before using the port-key to return to the hospital.

"What did you do to him?! *Did you hurt him, Harry?*"

"Not yet."

"Then where is he?"

"He's in the maze."

Sara turned indignant. "You locked him in an *inescapable room* with a *vampire*?"

Harry gave a wry smile. "Yes."

"Well I do hope you intend to get him out before sunset!"

"I'll think about it." Harry said and sat on the side of the bed to face her. He took her hand and kissed

it.

* * *

"Malfoy!" Sara gasped, horrorstruck. "Harry, you *forgot* him!"

Harry sat up and his face went blank. Snape looked up from his magazine, and Dumbledore poked his head in the door, his brow raised in questioning.

Sara closed her eyes and reached out for Nikolae. It was full dark outside and she knew he tended to wake early. She swallowed her panic and shouted her plea through the distance. *Don't hurt him!*

Calm yourself, Nikita. He replied, *Your friend is unharmed.*

Sara clutched the Fortificus Charm, to Harry's annoyance, and breathed relief.

Have no fear. I will keep him safe.

Thank you. She said, *He is very dear to me, Nikolae, and he needs every one of us. Help him if you can. Give him anything he needs. I'll see you soon.*

Sara looked back to Harry. "He's alright." She said, "Nikolae is looking after him."

"At least," Snape sneered at Harry, "*someone* is."

"Harry, gather my things if you would. I'm going home. I can rest just as easily there, if not better.

This place is nerve-racking."

"I will find the Head Medi-wizard and get your instructions." Snape offered and left the room after stopping briefly in the doorway to update the Headmaster.

"Sara," Harry asked, "are you sure?"

"Yes. And I'm sorry I hit you with lightning, Harry, but you left me little choice."

They turned as Dr. Howard came bustling into the room, followed by Snape and a medi-witch in crisp hospital whites, scribbling on a clipboard. Snape and the doctor were talking loudly, arguing really, and the doctor turned his full attention to Sara. Snape was insulted at having been dismissed without warning, but kept it to himself. His voice was nasal, and somehow both froggy and sharp. His manner was concise and no-nonsense and Sara adored him. He reminded her of a bald-headed Hermione.

"You are *not* going home, young lady!"

"I had intended to." She replied.

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"In *your* condition? Have you forgotten the curse that struck you Miss Lemke?"

"You know I haven't."

The chubby little doctor tried to smile as his cheeks turned red with frustration. "You require monitoring and in order for that to be accomplished you'll need to remain in our care."

"I just need to rest is all." Sara sighed.

"If *Avada Kedavra* didn't kill you, I doubt one night in a hospital bed will either. Stay until the morning." He glanced at Harry, then back at Sara. "Visiting hours could be *overlooked*."

Harry smiled down at her. "Perhaps you should follow the doctor's advice."

"Will you come back?"

"Of course I will. But get some rest. I want to talk to Draco and I suppose he'll be needing dinner."

"Severus will stay with me until then." She hesitated, "If you hurt him, Harry, I'll never forgive you. I mean that."

Harry held her eyes for a moment, knowing she meant what she said. "I'll see you soon, Sara."

He kissed her and touched the key in his pocket.

* * *

Nikolae was in the cottage's small kitchen when Harry arrived, rummaging through the cupboards.

"Type A positive is on the left." He said without humor. He collapsed into a chair, dropped his portkey on the dinette and gave a heavy sigh. "Is he still *absent*?" he asked the vampire, "He was a little distant last I saw him."

"When I first encountered him, he was as you describe. He was lost in his own mind, escaping inwardly." Nikolae explained and was quite suddenly seated at the table, giving Harry a start.

"Fortunately, I was able to reach him. Sara never told me Draco Malfoy was a telepath."

"He is?"

"He is. This was the means I used to speak with him. He was incapable of conversing the usual way, but slowly he began to respond with thoughts and images. He was coherent when I left him. He asked me for water." Nikolae reflected for a moment, his polyjuice face dark and troubled. "A vampire rarely feels such sympathy."

Harry's chair hit the floor as he leapt to his feet. "*Enough!*" He yelled, "Do you even know what he did?"

"Yes."

"And you didn't *kill* him?"

"I would not."

"What *is* this? Am I the only one who thinks there's something wrong here? Can no one see the facts?

He tried to kill Sara! There's nothing more to know!"

"Can you not see past the act itself?"

"No! And I don't want to! He's not deserving of compassion, Nikolae, he's a murderer!"

"And so is our Nikita. Does she also deserve no compassion?"

Harry stopped just long enough to refuse to consider it. "That's different."

"Is it? I thought all life was created equal."

"You know better than that. Besides, Dumbledore once told me that it's our choices that make us what we are and we both know all choices are not created equal. They define the person who makes them.

That's how I see it."

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Nikolae waited to reply. So long that Harry decided on a change of subject. "What did you see?" He asked the vampire, "You said he communicated with images. What did he show you?"

"A diviner never reveals the thoughts of others." He explained, to Harry's frustration. "We're like priests I suppose, able to listen, but bound by a code of secrecy. It is our thoughts, Harry, that are our most private possessions." He stood before Harry could reply and returned to the cupboards. "Your guest is hungry."

* * *

The door opened and Nikolae stepped through it, bearing a torch and a tray of food. His hair was brushed, his attire relaxed and lustrous. He looked like a prince with a kindly, compassionate smile and Draco welcomed the sight of him. "How is Sara?" He asked.

"She is well." Nikolae told him. "She will not return tonight."

"I can't reach her." Draco sighed, "I think she's dreaming."

"She is."

"Good." Draco said and accepted the tray, which he set on the floor beside him. "Peanut butter sandwiches?"

"It's what he was having."

Draco took the plastic bottle and opened it. "I've had this before." He admitted as he studied the label.

"Coca-cola. They have this in a little pizza shop near my house called *Vincenzo's*. There's a sign for it on the back wall where they keep the list of toppings, only they serve it in a paper cup with a plastic lid and a long tube for drinking. I like it." He said, "It tastes similar to pepper, but it's sweet and sort of burns."

"I've never had the pleasure myself. There were no such ticklish potions when I was still warm of blood."

"And when was that exactly?"

"I lived a thousand years ago, give or take, in the time of Salazar Slytherin."

Draco's eyes came alive. "I was in Slytherin House at Hogwarts! Tell me about him."

"There isn't much to tell, really. It was a dark time in our history and wizards everywhere lived in fear."

"What was Slytherin like?"

"A sullen man, secretive. He worked quietly, directing his faithful from the shadows." The vampire told him, "He controlled all the dark creatures, much as Voldemort does in this time, and set them on villages that didn't meet his expectations. Those who resisted his evil influence often met with a terrible fate in the night. Most were killed, though a handful survived in an altered form. I am one of those."

"Your village was attacked by Salazar?"

"It was a bad harvest, I remember, because of the drought, and most of the crops were ruined or underdeveloped. The community, muggle and magic alike, steeled itself for a harsh winter scarce of food and without means, for the loss of whole crops devastated both our source of sustenance and profit. There weren't two schillings hidden beneath our floor and it was the same in every house.

People were bitter and on edge, wondering how they would live if the deer were quick and the men were weak from hunger." Nikolae sat lightly on the edge of his sarcophagus. "By mid-December the talk around the supper table had turned from stories of days passed, which my siblings and I were all quite tired of, to the more exciting topic of the extraordinary number of strangers in town. They had begun coming to the inns around All Hollow's and continued to arrive in pairs, or more often, alone. There had to be a dozen strangers residing in town at that time and the talk was rampant. No one trusted any of them.

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"We took a few of them in for a meal on occasion and they talked mostly of odd happenings elsewhere and asked my father troublesome questions about omens. They tried to frighten us with talk of evil forces coming east out of England and offered money and protection in exchange for assistance in capturing the Elemental. She, of course, lived in the Gypsy village, Keltse-tia, at the foot of the mountains three days walk from our settlement. It was, as they said, so she could be used to defeat this Dark Lord who threatened our safety. My family was horrified. Very few took them seriously and the rest eventually turned suspicious, my parents and brothers included. Only two agreed to the proposal, both poor farmers with too many children to feed. The rest formed a lynch mob outside the inn where most of the strangers lodged."

"What happened?" Draco wondered.

"I was with my father, as were my four elder brothers, when the lynching happened. Eight men were overpowered and strung up right there on the front porch of the Ashwinder Inn. The others fled for their lives and two of those escaped." Nikolae paused as memory burned bright and troublesome in his eyes. "I was sent as a messenger to Keltse-tia, was given the fastest horse in town, a beautiful black Pegasus with a severed wing that belonged to the Supreme Mugwump, and a good sword. I rode all night, stopping only when necessary and sometimes not even then. The grand horse was strong and tireless and so I was also." He paused for a slow breath. "Exhausted and with my stomach woefully empty, I reached Antonya in the first light of dawn."

"You told her about the lynching?"

"Straight away. She was in great peril I explained, but she did not take me seriously. I ranted, begged

her to take measures, swore to protect her with my life and offered the allegiance of my entire village. I got down on my knees and asked her with all my heart to take refuge, but her only answer was a kind smile. She was not old, only twenty-three then and fresh from her apprenticeship. She was strong, but green when it came to her skills and I was frightened for her."

"You loved her." Draco sensed. "And you found her beautiful. Sara said the Elemental always is."

"Yes. But she was so much more than that. Antonya was breathtaking. Her skin was porcelain perfection. She was without flaw and raven-haired, and had dazzling violet eyes."

"How did you convince her?"

"I didn't. She was also stubborn in her carelessness. She had the Orb of Arassel and relied upon it totally for protection. She thought as long as it was near to her then she was far from harm. How wrong Antonya was." Nikolae's eyes welled with unshed tears. "She took me in, gave me food and allowed me to rest before returning home. For my family I was given bread, cheese and a small deer, which I laid over the back of my magnificent horse with gratitude. Something came over me as I turned to mount and I kissed her, even though she was four years my senior. It was impulsive and foolish, for I risked the wrath of my father if word came back to him, but I kissed her anyway and she kissed me as well. It was with a smile that I rode back to my farm."

"You never saw her again."

"I did. Once more." The vampire whispered. "I knew before I'd broken through the trees and onto the road that led through town that something was wrong. It was full dark and late by the path of the moon, but not even the animals stirred. Doors hung open on the little shops. When I reached the Ashwinder Inn, I tethered my steed and entered."

"They were all dead, weren't they? All of them."

"Not all, but we'll come to that soon. The carnage was everywhere. All were dead inside the Ashwinder. Several bodies littered floor of its tavern and the musicians slumped over their instruments. Mugs of beer stood undisturbed, the patrons fallen near their seats without struggle. Most were taken in their beds and I can only imagine how quickly it all happened. It wasn't until I arrived at my house that I realized I was being followed."

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Draco saw a flash of memory, a little fieldstone dwelling in the dark, a black horse, agitated and frightened, surrounded by a great cloud of misty winter breath. There was a *presence* in the air. Something lurked in the night close by. Something *dangerous*. Draco could feel it and the hairs stood up on the back of his neck.

"My family was slaughtered." Nikolae continued, "As I was then only nineteen, I was quickly overcome by grief. I held my youngest sister, Alaina, in my arms for she was my favorite and barely four years old. That was how they found me, sitting on the floor as I cursed God through my tears, holding the child and with my sword in hand."

"Vampires?"

"Indeed. Five in all. To be certain, they made short work of me. I slashed them with my sword and they recoiled from the attack, but the wounds healed at once and so I could not win. I would have died there with the rest of my kin had vampyric blood not mingled with my own."

"So that's how it happened."

"It is. I went through the change differently, as you know, but I still looked like myself and did for years after. They backed away from me as I stood, still cradling Alaina, then turned and fled in fear of me."

"Did you find them?"

"I didn't even look. I tucked my beloved back into bed and ran out of the house with the pittance from under the kitchen floor."

"You went back to the Gypsies."

"Of course I did. I knew Antonya would listen to my warnings if I told her about what had happened in Strovnich. To my relief, I found her unharmed and expecting my arrival. As a diviner, she saw my approach, but not the path that lay behind me. She didn't know what happened. I'll never forget what she said when she took my hand." He paused again, reliving the painful moment.

Draco saw a flash of Antonya with her dark hair floating around her and the arresting violet eyes the Vampire spoke of. He grasped the image and committed it to memory. "What did she say?"

"*'Mortality bleeds from you.'* she told me. She sensed the change, which was not yet complete and wouldn't be for two more nights. I told her what had befallen me and she took me to her chamber where we remained together until daybreak. I kissed her one last time and had no choice but to hide myself in the back of Antonya's small pantry under a pile of heavy old drapes. When I awoke she was dead. Ambushed by three dozen vampyres at twilight."

"But," Draco said, "what about the Orb? How could they kill the Elemental?"

"Use your head, Draco. Vampyres kill using brute physical strength, not magic, and they're fast. However, they are not how she died. The vampyres only rendered her defenseless, too weak to rise off the ground as the dark wizards set to take her to their master. Antonya, knowing what would happen, called on the lightning and directed it at herself."

Nikolae sat quietly for a moment and then left the room without word. Draco lay down on the cold stone. He closed his eyes, troubled.

Draco awoke in the darkness. There were no windows in this small room, only the sarcophagus. Not even a torch or a candle for light. It was cold, especially after laying on the stone floor for what could

only be hours. Time had helped him, though. He was feeling more like himself, only filled with sadness and self-loathing. His guilt over Sara was sharp and exquisite.

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Nikolae's story had helped him. He doubted even the Vampire knew how much. Though he had no siblings, hadn't Draco lost his family as well? He agreed that the loss of his evil father and his somewhat evil mother hardly compared to losing a large, loving family (the jolly, mirthful Weasleys passed through his thoughts) as well as every member of the close-knit community Nikolae had known his entire life, but the pain that lingered, festering and malignant, the kind that never really went away, was still the same. They were all just rifts in the soul after all. Something with the power to haunt one's dreams for a *millennium*. Maybe even longer.

Nikolae died himself that night, but was given a second chance in the resurrection by becoming the rarest of vampires. Free of mind and will, remembering humanity with human compassion. Yet he was doomed to a cursed life of reluctant servitude. Forever locked in a wicked existence, feeding an insatiable bloodlust, the quiet evil driving him to harm those who were innocent. Draco's wall-less prison was no different, no less profound. In fact, Nikolae was the lesser of two evils. Nikolae was still a good, respectable person, vampire or otherwise. Draco was not. Not even in his own mind. Then there was a common love for an Elemental. He couldn't comprehend the way the grief had invaded him when he'd learned Antonya's fate. He thought of her as he had seen her in the Vampire's memory, flawless, beautiful, with dazzling violet eyes, and he thought of Sara. Nikolae had forever lost the Elemental he loved, but Draco had been given a second chance.

Harry was the only problem. Nothing new there, but this time he had *really* done it. Potter would never forgive him for this. Harry would see him dead before he'd tolerate Draco's presence after what he had done. And Draco didn't blame him. If he wanted to strike directly at Potter, killing Sara was the straightest and most devastating means. In truth, as he'd drawn his wand this morning, it was Harry's suffering that dominated his thoughts, not his own. It had been agony. Draco thought he'd die of regret right there beside her as he spoke his curse and the world went black from the inside. He did it knowing he would lose his beloved Sara forever and that Harry would never be same. Something inside him would wither and go out. Something integral and necessary. That was what upset him the most.

A sliver of light cut through the darkness and Draco sat up, shielding his eyes until the door opened a little further. The first thing he saw was a brilliant halo around a black hooded cloak. He thought at once of Nikolae, and then he saw the wand, pointed directly at him.

"It's just me, Harry. Not a pack of Grecian manticores." He said with a tired voice. "If you've come to kill me then get it over with. Don't make me get up *just for that*."

Harry's face soured. "I wouldn't give you such an easy out."

"Then do what you like with me. After all, it's you or Voldemort. I have a feeling anything you might come up with would be preferable."

Then I should hand you over to him myself if that's what you fear. You deserve nothing more."

"So what happens to me then?"

"I don't know. I haven't decided yet. For now you'll stay in this room, but know that there is no way out unless you can surprise and overpower a vampire."

"But is there any way *in*?"

"What do you mean?"

"Could someone wander in and get into this room?"

"Well if they could either breach the house or figure out the password for the tunnel, find the invisible door in the wall on the stair, make their way through a trick maze, get past the trap outside the door, remove the wards and the spells, and then speak a password only 4 highly trustworthy people know, myself included, then yes. Someone could get in."

"Can you post a guard?"

Harry seethed. "Do you even *realize* what you've done?"

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"How could I ever forget?"

"Then how *dare* you make *jokes*?"

"It's not a joke, Potter. Voldemort will be looking for me and he'll find me. You gave me your word once, on the roof at Hogwarts. You said if I ever changed my mind that you would help me. If you have any integrity at all, then help me now. I'm *asking* you."

"Any promise I made to you is null and void."

"I asked you *twice* to kill me, Potter. When you refused, when you allowed me to live, you made my life your responsibility."

"What you did is not my fault."

"No, but I saved her, didn't I? I never wanted to hurt Sara, but I had no other choice! I need help because I'm not dead! *That's* what I'm saying."

"There are questions I need answers to. Starting right now."

"I'll answer your questions, but you really only have one, don't you? You want to know *why*. Well I'll tell you, Potter, I'll tell you everything, but in order for you to understand, I'll have to start at the beginning. The night they caught me trying to board the train to France."

"Is this going to be a long story?"

"Definitely."

"Then get up. I won't be standing in the doorway the whole time. Let's go upstairs. For *my* benefit, not

yours."

Draco stood and Harry moved out of the doorway, wand still in hand and pointed in warning. "Now walk."

It must have taken ten full minutes to reach the study in which they settled on soft green leather couches amid an immense, but mostly empty library. Harry poured them each a drink. Draco downed his double-shot of Finnegans Swill, took the decanter and refilled his glass as if it was water. He held it as he sank into the couch, staring into the warmth of the fire.

"I'm so cold." He said and rubbed his bare arms, dusty from lying on the floor. Harry took off his cloak and handed it over. Draco felt the rich fabric and hand-sewn brocade and nodded his approval out of habit, forgetting for a moment that he was an attempted murderer worthy of Azkaban. Sometimes, it just didn't seem real, but then the knowledge came flooding back. He took a drink and stared at the amber reflected in his glass.

"It all started when I tried to run, as you know, but I carried something with me that was better left behind. Something of my fathers that he said I could use if I ever needed the most desperate sort of help. Little did I know what he meant by *help*. Of course, it was a port-key of all things." He sipped his drink, "Voldemort's people were all over the train station, closing in on me until a few could reach out and touch me. I panicked. I opened the locket and was transported directly into the catacombs."

"The catacombs? Like the ones under Paris?"

"Exactly like that. Only these are under the ruins of an old castle."

"Your father sent you *underground*?"

"No, Potter. He sent me to Voldemort."

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30. Affinity without Integrity

Christina checked her watch, noting it was now one in the morning, and then took up her pacing again. Draco had been gone for so long that she couldn't help being worried about him, especially under the circumstances. And the parade of miserable visitors was unnerving to say the least. First there was angry/sad Harry Potter, whom she had immediately liked, even though he'd scared her quite badly. After Harry had come Severus Snape, who she liked well enough, but he was short with her and distraught. Then had come the other two, to whom Christina had assigned names, for they never gave any. "Leery-eyed Red" and "Ms. Pushy." These last two had been the most difficult. Even Harry with his smashing and yelling had been easier to deal with. They weren't taking 'I don't know' for an answer. After suffering their unending interrogation, Christina eventually locked herself in Draco's room and for all she knew, they were still here, snooping around. It wouldn't surprise her if they were. She hadn't seen Draco carry a phone, so how could she possibly contact him? She had no address to visit, no middle-man, unless you count Severus, whom she didn't know how to get in touch with, either. It appeared she would have to sit tight and wait for Draco to return. She just hoped he was alright. Lord knows he wasn't the last time she'd seen him.

As soon as Harry left, Christina had gone back to her own room, showered and dressed for the day, expecting more angry visitors. Now, hours and hours later, she was restless. Pacing just wasn't enough. She had almost made up her mind to go down the hill in the limo when a giant blackbird flew in through the doors to the balcony. Its caw shattered the silence; demanding her attention, then flew to the desk and pushed the stationary around with its beak.

"Get away from there!" She told it, afraid Draco would think she was going through his things,

"Shoo!"

Again, the bird nudged the neat stack, and then picked up one of those long feather quills you only see in period films and dropped it on top. Curious, Christina stepped closer, for it seemed to understand what it was doing. To her amazement, the blackbird, the biggest one she'd ever seen, lifted the lid on a little inkwell and cawed once more. Feeling a little spooked, she gingerly sat at the desk and nearly panicked when the enormous bird flew onto her shoulder. Dipping the quill in ink, Christina began her letter with uncertainty. It seemed a little foolish to write it at all, but something told her to go ahead anyway.

Draco,

I'm sorry to be writing to you, I know you're upset and I know why. Harry Potter came here looking for you, so did Severus and a ginger-haired guy with a very pushy girl who was actually a little frightening. Harry smashed a bunch of your stuff, but he told me what happened.

Last night you asked me to stay here because I might be your only friend after today. I don't know about the 'only' part, but I am exactly that. You told me that you were being forced into a terrible situation, so I know that you didn't want to hurt your friend Sara. I hope she's alright, Draco. Everyone who came here said that she could still be saved. I don't know how it ended. I can only hope that they found you in time.

I also hope you're alright wherever you are tonight. Please send some kind of word, just so I can stop worrying. I'll stay here until your return. If you need a friend, you know where to find me.

Christina

P.S. I hope you don't mind if I sleep in your room while you're gone. I know it's assuming and I apologize, but I want to know as soon as you get back.

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Christina folded the letter, put it in an envelope, tucked in the flap, and held it out to the blackbird, who had hopped onto the desk. It looked at her expectantly, then took the letter in its beak and flew off through the open balcony doors.

* * *

Draco sipped his drink and set the glass on the low table he shared with Harry. The roaring blaze in the fireplace warmed him under Harry's expensive cloak and the rum heated him from the inside. The chill that had crept into his bones diminished without his noticing as he told his story.

"What happened?" Harry urged him on, "What did he say to you?"

"I was terrified." Draco sighed and fell back onto the sofa, his arm slung over his forehead, watching the firelight dance on the ceiling without much interest. "He *knew* I was terrified. I didn't put up much of a fight. In the *end* I did, but not just then." Draco sipped his drink and replaced it on the table, finding it difficult to say it out loud at long last.

"He thought I had gone there of my own free will, so I immediately went along with it. I said I'd come to formally reject his offer and told him I had pressing matters to attend to in France."

"You *lied* to the Dark Lord?"

"Well, it wasn't really a lie. I *did* have pressing matters in France - those being getting as far away from him as possible." Draco sighed again and let his arm fall onto the leather, propping himself up to look at Potter. "I didn't *dare* try to ride my broom. I knew he could easily catch me that way. So, being who my father was, I thought my taking flight on a muggle train was the most unpredictable thing I could do."

"Actually," Harry interrupted, "When I pictured you trying to give him the slip, that's *exactly* how I imagined you doing it. With your hair tied back and wearing a hat and sunglasses. I liked the shirt you had on, it drew my attention, and that's when I knew they would catch you."

"By my shirt?"

"It was *green*. A billboard for the Slytherin eye. You wore your house colors, Malfoy. You usually do. And your hair is practically white. Anyone you passed would notice it."

"I tied it back."

"It wasn't enough."

"What did you want me to do? Wear a wig?"

"That would have been even *more* obvious. You should have gone to Snape for a potion."

"Harry, I was wearing a green shirt. And I *did* tie my hair back. Are you by any chance telepathic? Because *that* would be... *very improbable*."

"I'm not. I've had dreams, I am somehow linked to Voldemort, and I have an intuition occasionally, but I'm not telepathic. I hear *you* are, though."

Draco's eyes grew anguished and he lowered them to Harry's feet. "I never knew I was. It just happened one day. There was something I wanted to say to someone, and I wanted to say it *so badly*. I just sort of *reached out* to her from the inside and pushed the thought along the connection I imagined was there. All at once I knew that she'd heard me. She was on the other side of the street, looking in the direction of my car, and when I spoke her head snapped up and her eyes locked right on mine. There was a pane of dark tinted glass between us and I knew she couldn't possibly see me, but she *did*."

Harry almost smiled. "Sara can be rather frightening that way."

"She is. It's unsettling sometimes, the way she just *knows*, but she didn't know how hard it was for me. I couldn't make her hear me after that and she was asking me questions that I desperately wanted to answer. She mistook my silence, of course and sped off seconds before we got a freak rainstorm. I did much better the second time, but we'll come to that."

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"Yes, pressing matters in France. Please continue." Harry spoke with an air of sarcasm, but the truth was, he was dying to know what happened to Draco and no one else would fill him in.

"He laughed." Draco said. "He laughed at me from the inside out. I don't know how long he stood there *laughing*; it seemed like at least ten minutes, but who's to know for sure. I was too busy being terrified to note the time."

"Understandable."

"It was early afternoon, broad daylight outside, but it was black as night in the catacombs, and of course being underground it was cold and, in most places, damp. I never got used to it. I was sick a lot during those months, but again, we haven't gotten that far yet." Draco sipped his drink and held the glass as he fell back into his monologue. "Have you ever felt the Crucio Curse, Potter?" He did not wait for Harry to reply. "It's a word I know well enough." He took another quick sip as his eyes filled with darkest memory. "I remember falling to my knees in sudden and indescribable agony and the next thing I knew I was waking up and it was hours later. My internal clock told me it was night, though there were no windows in my little room, just a torch and a steel slab, mounted on a platform of solid rock. There were restraints attached to it, hanging off the sides like some cruel, medieval joke. There was only one heavy steel door with a guard posted outside. I hammered on it, demanding to be let out, when he opened a little slat, looked at me, and then closed it again without a word. I sat on the table and waited."

"He went to get Voldemort."

"Of course he did. And I wasn't kept waiting long."

* * *

Sara awoke to a stuffy room full of stale air and to the soft snoring that came from the chair next to the bed. Severus had fallen asleep atop a book that lay open on the blankets beside her. She smiled and brushed the hair back from his face in the dimness, tucking it affectionately behind his ear. He never stirred.

A tapping came again at the window and Sara slid gracefully out of bed to admit the Raven, the sight of which still filled her with dread. Reminding herself that Lucius was gone forever, she took the Malfoy Family Stationary and paused only briefly at the tucked-in flap, missing its usual black seal. She read the letter at once and found herself confused.

Who was Christina? Draco had never mentioned her, and clearly they weren't involved if she was apologizing for sleeping in his room. No housekeeper would write a letter such as this. She'd mentioned Harry, Severus, Ron and Hermione. She had even shown concern for Sara, though they had never met. Why had no one mentioned this girl that every last one of them had spoken to? And why had the Raven brought the letter to *her*? It was addressed to Draco after all.

"It can't get to him." She reasoned in a whisper. "*But I can.*"

Sara quietly found some clothes and a good cloak in the bag that Harry had brought and changed right there at the foot of the bed. Severus woke up during her rummaging, stared in silent shock as she unexpectedly tossed her nightgown to the floor, then squeezed his eyes shut and feigned sleep, highly uncomfortable. Sara opened the window completely and climbed onto the sill. At this point Snape raised his head and called out to her in a whisper. "*Where are you going?*" But Sara had already thrown herself into the wind and the Raven followed.

* * *

"Stop jumping ahead, Potter!" Draco sneered, "Do you want to hear this or not?"

"Go ahead then, *Scheherazade*, but get on with it." Harry said, reclined in his chair and growing bored with all the narrative. "Tell me what happened when he got there. I really don't care about how you had to *go to the bathroom.*"

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"Fine then." Draco said as annoyance creased his brow. "But he didn't come alone. A few of my father's friends were there and some I didn't know. Mr. Goyle was one of the ones that helped hold me down as the others bound me to the table and Voldemort himself stood off to the side until I was secure. At that point the flat part of the table was levitated through the door with me on it.

"I was set back down in a much larger room, able to hold a good sized crowd, but there were only a few waiting for us there. The ones from the train station.

"I was set down at an angle, so that I could see some of the faces around me almost eye to eye, but it was mostly so that I could be readily viewed by all who gathered around. My shirt had been removed, though I had no idea when this was done, and the chill in the air crept over me until I was shivering. Of course they took this for fear, which was something I had no lack of, but for some reason I kept thinking that I would get out of the situation. It seemed surreal to me and I firmly believed that something unexpected would happen to draw their attention away. Or perhaps even the *Gryffindor Trio of Goodness* would take pity on a lowly Slytherin and come to my rescue. All manner of things went through my head in those few minutes, for surely that's all it was, and it wasn't until Voldemort touched his wand to my arm that I came to grips with it."

"Reality set in."

"In a big way. I struggled against the bindings, but realized right away that I couldn't pull free or break them by force. I was consumed by fear, and the strangest thing happened."

"What was it?"

"*I shrunk.* One moment the restraints were cutting into my arms and just that fast I was half my size and slipping right out of them. I bolted through their legs, to their surprise and, though I didn't have my wand to protect me, I managed to get past them and run into a neighboring room."

"Let me guess, they caught you within minutes."

"The room was a dead end. I never stood a chance. Within moments I was back on the slab, strapped in, and immobilized by a patrificus spell. I did the only thing I could do and spit in Voldemort's face, but all it got me was a round of meaningful *crucios*. It was then, in the grip of crippling pain, that I received the Dark Mark."

Harry had been drawn in by Draco's tale and could think of only one thing to say. "*What happened next?*"

"They left me there for maybe half an hour. They were having some sort of conference too far away from me to hear, but eventually, the whole group returned and I was taken back to the little room where I was instructed to redress. I was in pain. It was difficult to stand and on top of the spells, my arms ached from holding the weight of my body for so long and it was hard to do the buttons, but I managed. All I wanted to do was get out of there. Instead I was taken to a chamber where I met with the Dark Lord alone."

"He tried to brainwash you."

"I imagine that was his goal. That or to threaten me. We talked for a long while, maybe an hour, and over and over I found the things he said made sense to me, they all had a legitimate point, but the thought behind them and the ideas they supported were *demented*. I voiced my opinions carefully and always remembered to validate these views of his by giving corroborating and well thought out responses. In a few words, I pretended to share in his theories. Or at least to see the truth in them."

"Only he didn't fall for it."

"You don't know me very well, do you Potter? I rarely do it, but I can lie when I need to and at that point I would have to say my life depended on it."

"What did you talk about? What sort of things did he say to you?"

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"Just the usual lunatic Dark Lord stuff. Kill the muggles. Kill the opposition, take over the Ministry."

Rule the world. *Dumbledore is the enemy*. Same old stuff, Potter. The same nonsense they've gone on about for centuries. He asked me a lot of questions about you and Sara and Hogwarts, but I put an end to *that* without saying anything vital. Sarcasm is a wonderful thing, you know."

"You are rather gifted with it." Harry agreed.

"I told him that I had plans to go to classes and meant to sign up at the Ministry the next morning, which was a bold faced lie, but it seemed to please him. He told me only one thing of value. He said that if I defied him I would regret it, though I wouldn't enjoy the luxury of death. If I defied him, I would come to see death as my *only* salvation. I didn't understand it then, but I do now. I understand it *well*." Draco took a drink and fell silent.

* * *

"Hello, Christina." Sara said as she stepped from the shadows of the balcony, and entered Draco's bedroom.

Christina jumped from the bed with a gasp and grabbed a length of pipe she kept next to her, propped against the stand.

Sara spoke with her soft, hushed, *windswept* voice into the darkness. "I mean you no harm. I'm a friend of Draco's." She crossed casually to the small bar in the shadowy far corner of the room and poured some cognac into a glass. This she sipped and turned back to the brown haired girl, who was dressed in a granny-type cotton nightgown and holding the pipe with trembling hands.

"Drink?" Sara asked as she moved to stand in the warmth of the fire. Her skin was chilled from her short, but brisk flight and she already felt her stamina seeping away.

"N-no! How long have you been *hiding* out there?! What do you *want*?"

"Why, I've only just arrived!" Sara said, and then realized three things. One, that the girl holding the pipe was obviously a muggle and had no concept of 'flying in', she needed desperately to sit down, and finally that she had not yet lowered the hood of her cloak and might seem a menacing figure with only the fire for light. "*Forgive me*." She said, pushed the fabric back from her hair and smiled fully as her platinum curls spilled down around her and the Raven came to rest on her shoulder. "I'm Sara."

* * *

"Well? Don't stop *there*."

"The next moment I woke up on the hillside behind my house." Draco paused in contemplation, "It was a wonderful feeling, to be *home*, and it's strange that he chooses to send me to that exact spot, and always laying down in the grass, staring up at the sky, no matter if I was standing when I left."

"Why's it strange? It's *your house*, after all."

"It's one of my favorite places. I go there when I need to think or clear my head. That night I was thankful for it and I stayed awhile on the gossamer-green blanket of grass with the wind stirring the thick August heat. Spread out below me was the city of London, its millions of lights muted by a low rolling stratum of fog. Above me was the clear night sky, so full of stars that I thought I could lay there forever and not see them all. As I gazed up at them, I thought of the nights we spent on the roof."

"Turning into quite the poet, aren't you?" Harry gave a tired, halfhearted grin, "*Draco 'Melodrama' Malfoy*. Has a nice ring to it, don't you think?" Harry's sarcasm was gaining in humor and beginning to lose its angry tone. Draco ignored it.

"Potter, you're going to think I'm full of it, but the time I spent at Hogwarts that summer was the only time in my life I've ever felt totally safe. I felt... *untouchable*."

"I don't think you're full of it, Malfoy. You *were* totally safe."

"There was more to it, though. Even though you're my sworn enemy."

Harry rolled his eyes.

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"I felt *at ease* I guess. I could just... I don't know."

"Be yourself?"

"Yes, Potter. I think that's exactly right. There weren't really any rules, after all, were there? We did whatever we wanted and drank enough rum to fill my swimming pool. There were no formalities. No appearances to keep up. There were no forced smiles. Absolutely *nothing* was false. If we hadn't been so miserable at the time, I'd almost say I was happy."

Harry smiled with sincerity. He was touched by such truth (and he knew it *was* truth) coming from Malfoy, but his anger, though quieted, was still very much present. "So, Sara's roof is your Happy Place and you go there when you lay on the ground outside your house. Go on."

"Now that you've *butchered the sentiment*, why bother?" Draco cast a side-long glance at Harry, who smirked. He took a deep breath and went on. "This is rather embarrassing, but I cried like a little kid, Potter. The Mark burned beneath my skin and I just couldn't *stop*. I knew I'd lost *everything*. My privacy, my integrity, my freedom of choice. I knew you wouldn't associate with a Death Eater and that any chance I might have had with Sara was gone. Just like that. *Gone*. At that moment there wasn't a soul on Earth as *alone* as I felt."

"Tread lightly, Malfoy." Harry mumbled without conviction, his eyes growing heavy. His glass of rum stood on the table, mostly untouched.

"It also meant that everything anyone had ever said about me was true, only I didn't want it to be. I couldn't stand the idea of being my father. It was that very thought which finally drove me to get my broom and fly to Hogwarts. To this day I still don't know what I was hoping to find there."

"Was this when you woke me up?"

"That was the night, yes." Draco almost smiled as he remembered Harry's concern, and the frustration that had poured from him as he demanded Draco *listen to reason*. The memory touched something

inside him and he let his eyes drift closed until it passed.

"There was the smallest ray of hope in me. I suppose I thought there would be a secret counter-curse or a clever potion that could take the Mark from my arm, though I knew deep down that there was not. I think mostly I wanted to hear you say that everything was going to be *just fine*. I wanted to be surrounded by reassurance because I couldn't *possibly* believe that what had happened to me was real. You almost convinced me, Potter, but it wasn't until after I'd arrived that I realized the *truth* of the situation. I was a threat and a danger to anyone who dared try to keep me from the Dark Lord, and I would serve to refocus his attention on you, and on Hogwarts. My only hope became that you would find a way to get me out of it."

"You refused my help and left! What was I supposed to do, Malfoy? Mount an army and go looking for you?"

"You *could have* helped me, Potter, you were right about that, but I also knew it wouldn't last. I couldn't live every day in fear, jumping at shadows, second-guessing the most ordinary of things. I had to go along with the charade."

"And you *did*."

"I was called mid-flight on the way back to my house. I landed and found myself back in the catacombs, face-to-face with Voldemort." Draco sipped, "I don't think I have to tell you he was less than pleased. I was followed, Potter. They saw me show you the Dark Mark."

Harry's voice was barely above a whisper. "*What did he do to you?*"

"I didn't see the sky again for nearly a year. I spent the first five or six months confined to my cell, for that's all it was, after all. A room quite similar to the one I woke up in that first night. I slept on a disgusting old feather mattress that was simply *covered* in stains, but it was better than the floor. The floor sucked what little bit of warmth I had left in me right out of my very bones. The only time I tried it, I woke up sick with fever. But that was the next morning. Back to the night before."

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"Mm-hmm." Harry's eyes were half closed by now, but he was so interested in Draco's story that he couldn't call it a night just yet. He *had* to find out what happened.

"Voldemort sat in a chair at the end of a long table. Three of my father's friends stood at his sides, as if awaiting instructions and they smiled knowingly when I was brought in. Someone hit me, I don't know who, but suddenly there was a blast of pain ringing through my head. I thought I'd been *shot*. If I was struck with a fist or some other object I couldn't tell you, all I can say is that it was a *hell* of a lot harder than you've ever hit me and I almost blacked out I think. By the time I realized I'd been struck, I was on my knees. Whether I was helped there or collapsed is anyone's guess.

"Anyway, to make a long story short, I was tortured for lack of a better word. You can call me melodramatic if you want, Potter, but torture is a gentle euphemism for what they did to me. I won't bore you with the details, but *crucio* was only the beginning." Draco swallowed hard and looked at the floor. His voice dropped to a whispered confession. "There are potions in this world of such profound evil, Harry, I don't dare speak of them. Not even now." There was a long moment where neither spoke, and then Draco continued.

"Voldemort called it training. *Lessons in obedience*. Nonsense like that. He came to me every day, beginning with the next morning. I was sick, as I said, but he took no pity on me. I was given a weak remedy and taken directly back to that meeting room where he gave me the Mark.

"I spent those first months adjusting to a daily routine. I was thrown food on a filthy plate through a slat at the bottom of the door, though I never ate in the mornings. I knew it wouldn't stay down for long if I did. After that Voldemort would come and he would push his ideas on me, ask me things that made me question my own beliefs and values, and then it would be my turn to talk and if I said the wrong thing the lesson would be especially painful that day. If I said what he wanted to hear I might only spend six or seven hours in the room with the steel table. What happened to me depended *completely* upon what I said. To be sure, I learned to control my temper.

"After awhile, I decided to abandon my attempts to retain an opinion and allowed myself to be brainwashed. I knew it was a dangerous decision, I mean, his words are like poison, Potter, and letting them in was as good as flinging open the doors on all the things my father taught me. Things I was made to believe from the day I was born and eventually rejected, but I couldn't take it anymore. I *had* to get out of there. I had become angry and hated Sara for all the wrong reasons. I blamed it all on her. Every bit of it. Yet I still loved her through the midst of it all."

Draco expected a bitter reaction, but when he looked to Harry, there was no contempt in his eyes. In fact, his eyes were closed, his head nestled in the side of the armchair and Draco watched as he drifted off to sleep.

Draco looked on him for a long moment, and then whispered. "*Happy birthday, Potter.*"

* * *

"Sara!"

Sara's eyes opened slowly, the room came lazily into focus, and she did not recognize the voice that summoned her from sleep, or the face that loomed above her. She was disoriented and the room was unfamiliar.

"Are you *alright?*"

"Who... where am I?" The spots cleared from her vision and it came back to her. "Oh! *Christina*." She said, trying to sit up. "Of course. *Draco's house*."

Immediately there was an arm around her, pulling her gently forward. "Don't move around too much. You dropped your glass. You'll get cut."

"Thank you" Sara whispered as the arm fell away. "I must have fainted."

"Is there someone I can call? You should be *in bed* after what you've been through."

"It seems my strength has abandoned me for the moment, but don't worry. It *will* return."

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"I'm glad to hear it." Christina smiled.

"If you would only help me up I can send the Ra-- the, um, *crow*."

Christina held out her hands and Sara took them. "Do *all* rich people wear *cloaks*?"

"Only the *totally mad* ones." Sara grinned and Cristina laughed as they crossed the room to the desk.

"Is it really that obvious?"

"What?" Christina asked, "That you're rich or totally mad?"

"Both." Sara replied as she lowered onto the chair.

"*Rich*, yes. You're as immaculate as Draco is, even after *almost dying* earlier." Christina set about getting her a glass of water. "By the way, you look just like him. He showed me a picture of the two of you dancing and I thought you were his sister."

"You're not the first to make that assumption."

Sara dipped the quill and touched the tip to a sheet of Malfoy Family Stationary.

Severus,

I am fine, but would you come to Draco's house and take me back to the hospital? Don't worry, I'm here with Christina.

Sara

Sara gave the note to the Raven and spoke to it in silence. *Bring this to Severus Snape at St. Mungo's. I am vulnerable. Wake him if you must.*

"That's some trick."

"Nothing more than what homing pigeons do."

"I've never seen a bird like that. It's huge!"

"It's a rare breed, so I was told. It belonged to Draco's father."

"I see." Christina said, remembering Draco saying that Sara had killed him. She didn't know what else to say.

Sara sipped the water and then carried it to the sofa before the fire. Almost immediately she felt lightheaded and dizzy, the spots crowded her vision and she almost stumbled, but Christina caught her and lowered her to the soft velvet cushions.

"Sara, why are you here? You're not well."

"I got your letter. The Ra-the *crow* brought it to me."

"Oh." She was quiet a moment, "I was worried about Draco. He was so *upset* earlier. I've never seen *anyone* so upset."

"He's alright. He's with Harry."

"*Harry*?! Harry was ready to kill him!"

"I assure you that Draco is safe, no matter what Harry might have said to you. One or both of them may have a black eye when we see them again, but it's to be expected when those two get together."

"They aren't friends?"

"Oh they are." Sara smiled, "But just try getting one of them to admit it. Although I have to admit, they don't actually like each other."

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"That's confusing."

"To be sure." Sara took a deep breath and hesitated. "Christina, I want you to know that no one ever found Draco. He came to the hospital alone and without being asked."

Christina smiled.

"It can be rather difficult to focus on his better qualities sometimes, but he always means well.

Regardless of what he does or what manner of sarcasm comes out of his mouth."

"I've only known him for about a week and a half," Christina admitted, "but I already see the qualities you speak of. He is kind and generous to say the least. And he's so *lonely* here in this big house.

Actually, he seems *lost* to me. Like a kindred spirit."

"You're intuitive." Sara said, "Perhaps you'll find a kindred spirit in me as well." She smiled warmly and sipped her water. "*Lost*, you say. No word describes him better." she sighed, "What you have to understand is that his is a tortured soul. I can't elaborate without Draco's consent of course, but you should know that his father was an evil man. You would do well not to ask much about his family."

"Thanks for the advice."

Sara laid a friendly hand on Christina's cheek. "Just promise me you'll be good to him, *regardless* of where your friendship goes." She whispered, "You don't know what he's been through."

A low, slippery growl crept from the corner, startling both girls. "You mean whatever's *left* of him, *Mrs. Potter*."

Sara's eyes found the balcony in the dimness and settled on a familiar figure in the doorway. A black hood hid his face in shadow, but frightening reddish eyes peered out from under it. Sara grabbed Christina's hand and squeezed as the Orb of Arassel erupted in soft pink light on Sara's finger, filling the room with it. Her other hand gripped the arm of the sofa.

Christina took it upon herself to address the new visitor, no longer surprised by such an improbable entrance. "Draco isn't here." She said with a small, trembling gasp.

Sara's own nervous voice betrayed her calm exterior. "I believe he's looking for *me*."

"Quite right, Miss Lemke. We meet at last."

"We've met before, in case you've forgotten."

"Yes, but not so *formally*." Voldemort drew his wand and leveled it at Sara. "You live due to the incompetence of a certain *mutual acquaintance*, so it appears the task now falls to me." Christina wrinkled her nose in confusion. "What *is it* with these *sticks*? And what's the deal with the *cloaks*?"

Sara smiled at the Dark Lord. "You know what they say, if you want a thing done right..."

"And I'm quite sure I'll enjoy it."

Sara's smile faded. "And why is that? What have I ever done to you?"

Voldemort chuckled and it was a sinister, menacing sound. "Lucius told me all about you. Before you *poisoned* him, that is."

Sara scowled. "A *merciful* death for the likes of him."

"And so it shall be for you as well." Voldemort stepped forward as the Raven came to rest on his shoulder.

Sara's eyes widened with understanding. Severus was not coming. *No one was.*

* * *

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Draco followed the slight curve of the stone steps toward the swish of lapping water far below him with warm, glowing sconces lighting the way. Walking with a quick pace, Draco stopped on a small landing where he thought he'd come through the wall with Harry earlier. He could see the faintest outline of an archway that would be easily missed by the untrained eye and Draco was suddenly struck by a vivid memory. He was looking up at Potter on the roof of Sara's tower and thinking that Harry looked like an angel, with the bright evening sun on his shoulders and a halo of golden light around the crown of his hair. He'd blindsided Draco with a surprisingly clever bit of sarcasm and then disappeared with a smug grin and a book under his arm - *Carving with Magic*. "Not bad, Potter." He whispered as he looked around, "Not bad at all."

Draco pushed at the door and it opened, to his surprise. He stepped into the room but his confidence failed him when he saw the entrance to the labyrinth. He simply didn't trust his memory to get him back through. Wrinkling his brow in concentration, he pushed his thoughts along an imaginary link.

Nikolae, he thought, *take me back to our room.*

Something rushed at him, no more than a blur that traveled like a flash, pushing the mental connection until Draco's head was pierced by a splitting pain and with it came images of Sara in a pinkish light. He was knocked backward onto the landing and crashed hard against the far wall, hitting his head and toppling down a few steps before he caught hold of the stairs. Something had positively *blown* past him and now he lay there, catching his breath and wondering what it was. What was *certain* was that Sara was in serious danger.

Bruised, scraped, bleeding and with his head pounding, Draco climbed to his feet, straightened Harry's fine cloak, and hurried back up the stairs.

* * *

Harry sat bolt upright with a gasp. Something was acutely wrong, but he didn't know what. He was surprised to find himself before the fire in the library until he recalled why he'd gone in there.

Glancing around the room, he found that Malfoy was gone. *Foolish*, Harry thought, *falling asleep with him free to do as he pleased*. Draco, he decided was miles away by now. Urgency pounded in his chest and all at once he knew that Sara was in serious trouble.

Harry ran to the lobby of the big house and looked around, his eyes darting from shadow to shadow, but finding nothing out of the ordinary. It occurred to him that he didn't even know where Sara was unless she was still at St. Mungo's. Something told him she wasn't.

All at once there was a great *whoosh* and Harry nearly lost his footing. He was brushed by a tailwind, as if something had rushed past him. Even before his hair had settled the front doors exploded outward, ripped from their frame and Harry braced himself for an attack. When a few moments passed and nothing happened Harry checked the locator and his eyes grew wide when he saw Sara was in "*mortal peril*".

Harry tried to clear his head, hoping some miraculous, ingenious plan would quite suddenly occur to him, but there was only the chaos of a million questions on his mind. Finally, he made the decision to go to the hospital, but just as he made to leave he heard the thunder of footfalls he'd expected moments ago. Someone was running toward him. Harry drew his wand and waited.

* * *

"You can't hurt me and you know it." Sara reminded the Dark Lord, "Unless you plan to *tackle* me again, that is. Only this time you wouldn't get very far."

"I can harm *her*, though." He directed his wand at Christina.

Christina swallowed hard. "It's not polite to point."

Sara squeezed her hand. "Why would you bother? She's just a servant girl Draco hired to do the laundering."

"So you would allow her to die to save yourself?"

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"Actually, I don't know why she's involved to begin with, but no, I think not. However, whatever transpires between the two of us will transpire *regardless*."

Voldemort saw the truth in her point and waited, considering. "Quite correct, Miss Lemke. The muggle is irrelevant."

Christina grew indignant. "Who's he calling *muggle*?" She asked, wondering what on earth a *muggle* was.

"Christina," Sara said, turning to her, "you may return to your duties."

"I can't leave you here." She whispered. "He means to hurt you."

Sara replied with a single word, barely audible, so low Voldemort could not hear it.

"Run."

Christina stood at once, turning to bolt for the door, only she collapsed face down on the carpet right there before the fire. Sara gasped as she watched Christina fall and turned her angry glare on Voldemort. "How dare you!" she seethed as anger streaked her hair crimson, "How dare you curse an innocent person! A defenseless muggle!"

"Innocent or not, muggles are the vermin who plague our world. They should be exterminated."

Sara went to Christina and knelt by her side.

"Don't worry. She's not dead. *Not yet.*"

"What exactly did you want with me?"

Voldemort replied, but Sara had tuned him out and didn't hear. Draco was whispering into her mind and slowly, Sara smiled.

* * *

"She's at my house, Potter." Draco said as he burst into the room, bellowing Harry's name, out of breath and with Harry's black cloak billowing out behind him. "We can't get to her in time."

"Your house? What do you mean?"

"I just *know*, ok? If you want to help her then listen to me."

Harry leered at him, his hands trembling with fear for Sara.

Draco returned Harry's stare with urgency. "Trust me Harry"

Harry saw no other options. "Alright," he said.

"Link wrists and hold tight." Draco wasted no time grabbing Harry's arms and clasping his hands around them. Harry quickly complied. "Now *concentrate* Potter! Push all your strength out through your arms and into mine."

Draco squeezed his eyes shut, his brow furrowed with immense concentration and Harry watched him for only a moment before doing the same.

* * *

Voldemort advanced into the room, taking slow, measured steps. From within his robe he brought an old fashioned revolver and leveled it at Sara's head.

Sara trembled. The Orb offered no protection from muggle weapons and if he pulled the trigger she would be dead and who knows what would happen to Christina. "Why would you kill me when you could use me against your enemies? I don't understand, I thought that was what you wanted?"

"You would never cause them harm. You're no longer of any use to me." He explained, "Elemental or not, I can't allow my enemies to possess such a force of power. Killing you is in my best interests you might say."

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Sara began to feel a tingle surge into and through her and her hand went directly to the Fortificus charm. *Thank God!* She thought as her fingers finally touched it. Strength glowed within her and she could feel their presence. She felt Harry's determination, skill, and the weight of his power. From Draco she felt confidence and stealth of mind. Sara also got a strong sense of fear from both of them. When the flood of reinforcement had recharged her, Sara turned her hands palms-up and a half-bubble dome of bluish-white electricity crackled and grew around her and Christina. Sara clutched the Fortificus Charm, feeling her own strength waver as she held tight to Draco's mental link, like hands held wrist to wrist. Voldemort fired the revolver, the bullets merely deflecting off the strong electromagnetic ward and he fired until nothing except hollow clicks issued from the gun.

Sara turned away from Christina and rose to her feet. "I hope you have a Plan B, Dark Lord, because I'm not that easy to kill."

"Don't worry." Voldemort replied, "I've always been resourceful." From his cloak he withdrew a large hunting knife and a bitter smile touched his lips. "You're weak, *aren't you?* Let's see how long you can hold that shield."

Sara's lips trembled. Her knees were weak her vision wavered. She fought hard to keep the nausea and vertigo from overwhelming her. Draco and Harry sustained her for the moment, but the truth was that she didn't think she could hold the shield much longer and she didn't have the strength to attack him. Sara's legs went numb as the last of her resilience drifted away. She felt her grasp on Draco's mental hand begin to slip. "*Hold on Sara!*" He pleaded, but she couldn't. As her eyes lingered on the blade in Voldemort's hand, as its flashing gleam swam in and out of focus, gray-white spots erupted before her eyes. Sara felt for the arm of the sofa, thinking she could fall gracefully into it. Instead, she collapsed to the floor beside Christina. Her fingers dropped from the Fortificus Charm and the shield evaporated.

* * *

"I lost her." Draco said and dropped Harry's arms, "She just... *let go.*"

"The car." Harry said with mounting urgency.

"It'll take *forever!*"

"*Come on!*" Harry said and grabbed Malfoy's sleeve as he ran through the broken front doors and to the Jaguar, still parked in the garage. (Thankfully, Sara had taken the SUV so she could hang her wedding dress.) He found the keys already in the ignition. Harry turned them, revved the engine, and touched the port-key, now hidden under the dashboard.

As soon as the smell of cows filled the air, Harry gunned the motor and Draco rocked back in his seat, one hand gripping the door and his knuckles white as they exploded down the open road toward

London.

* * *

Voldemort held the knife in one cold hand as he stood over Sara's listless body, crumpled on the floor atop her cloak and with her long hair fanned out around her. He dropped to his knees with a sinister smile. From within the folds of his robe he produced a small vial, which he pressed to Sara's wrist. Just above its lip Voldemort made a small cut in her skin and collected the blood that flowed from it. Something hastened his errand and he recapped the vial only half full and quickly tucked it in an inner pocket.

With both hands Voldemort raised the knife over Sara's chest in the pinkish light. When she was dead, he thought, the Orb would be his. His eyes locked on his target.

* * *

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The car took the hill with ease, blasting its way to the top like a rocket, and Harry and Draco were pushed back in their seats with the force of it. "Hold on!" Harry said as the Jaguar found the crest and the road flattened out before descending on the other side. He slammed on the brakes, jerked the wheel, and spun them around to face the gates with frightening precision. Draco bellowed the password and drew his wand to blast the slow-moving wings out of the way. Harry gunned the engine, left the long, indirect driveway and steered the car onto Draco's immaculate front lawn with the pedal to the floor.

* * *

Hovering outside Draco's bedroom balcony, Dumbledore threw out his hands and said half of a curse before the Dark Lord flew from Sara's side and smashed hard against the far wall, crashing through to the insulation with a puff of plaster and the clatter of things falling. The knife dropped from his hand and Dumbledore's words caught in his throat. The movement was so quick, so unexpected, that Voldemort was too stunned to fight off his attacker. He was tossed through the air as if feather light and the force that pursued him did not wait for him to climb back onto his feet. Voldemort was instantly ripped from the floor where he fell and Dumbledore stood on his flying carpet in wonder as he watched his arch-nemesis being literally thrown around the room by nothing more than a dark flash.

Harry and Draco exploded into the room, wands held out with nervous hands, and startled all present. The unknown attacker came to a sudden stop. Voldemort seized the opportunity, ran for the balcony and threw himself over the rail where the darkness enfolded him.

"Nikolae!" Harry said in disbelief.

Nikolae stood motionless, staring back at Harry.

Dumbledore landed nearby and stepped off his carpet, his eyes fixed on Sara as he hurried toward her. It was Draco who broke the silence. "*Christina!*" he yelled and rushed to where she lay prone beside the fire. Blood trickled from her nose and he gently rolled her over, pulling her up to rest against him. There was a purple lump on her forehead from where she'd struck the hard floor. "*Please be alive.*" He whispered.

The room had gone distant, but somehow Draco heard Harry's frantic voice and then the Headmaster announcing that Sara was alive. There was a gentle hand on his shoulder and in his head Draco heard Nikolae's voice. "*She's not dead, Draco. I can hear her heart beating from here.*"

The hand, as it turned out, belonged to Dumbledore. "Mr. Malfoy, is this girl a muggle?"

"She is, sir." He whispered. "She needs help. Take her to Madam Pomfrey."

"She cannot go to Hogwarts." Dumbledore sighed, "And St. Mungo's would never admit her for a simple spell that will wear off on its own."

"She can't stay here." Draco pleaded, "It isn't safe."

Nikolae spoke from his place against the wall. "Sara is awake." Instantly all eyes turned to Sara, who showed no sign of consciousness. "She is too weak to speak."

Dumbledore rose to his feet. "What does she say?"

"She insists that Harry protect the muggle." He turned his gaze to Harry alone. "She asks that you to take Christina to the house and keep her there."

"But she's hurt!" Harry protested, "She should see a doctor."

Nikolae again spoke for Sara. "*Get Severus.*"

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After several minutes of discussion and assurances, (and protests by Harry,) Nikolae and Dumbledore took Sara back to St. Mungo's on the flying carpet and Harry took Christina and Draco back to the house on the cliffs. Draco held her on his lap as she slept and Harry drove with the top up and in silence. The Jaguar rolled along fast, as Harry *always* drove fast, but without the bone-crushing velocity that had brought them to London.

Before long a line of wooden posts came into view and as the car drew closer Draco saw an old workhorse stretching its long neck over the live wire to reach the tall grass on the other side. Harry touched the key without slowing and the horse vanished.

The scene changed from stinky rural farmland to a wooded sea-side wilderness of porch lights and rickety old summer camps. Seasonal souvenir shops boasted *shells for sale* as well as *coral, maps, hats* and (in larger print) *T-shirts*. Another promised *one-hour scuba classes* and yet another offered "*competitive boat rentals*". This one sat beside the rocky Princeton Heights Marina. Down the road a bit was The Golden Fish, where Harry once said he often got take-out. Its bright yellow sign was unlit at this early hour and Draco watched as it slid past, stroking Christina's hair as the sign was swallowed

by the night and the darkness behind him.

* * *

Snape was waiting in the bounce of oncoming headlights as they arrived and Harry parked the car next to the cottage. Snape's expression was grave and his stance conveyed his worry. Nervous hands gripped the handle of a black apothecary case. "Sara is stable." He told Harry and Draco, who held Cristina, having been helped from the car with the unconscious girl in his arms. At Snape's urging, he carried her to the guest room at the back of the small dwelling.

"Sara is very weak." Snape continued as they walked, "She was near death when the Headmaster brought her in."

Harry looked ill. "She'll be alright, won't she?"

"Her doctor is confident that she'll be alert within a few days, but Sara will require *absolute bed rest*."

He looked to Harry with accusation. "Probably until the wedding."

Harry nodded, solemn, and said nothing.

Draco laid Christina out on the bed and Snape set his case on the stand beside her. He felt her head, lifted her lids to look at her eyes, and touched the skin of her arms. "Don't worry, Draco." He said with reassurance in his tired voice, "Christina should be fine by morning."

"Good." Draco said, his attempt to hide his concern apparent and awkward.

"She'll feel lousy, but I can always slip a potion into her food." Snape continued. "I will remain here tonight. Potter? I suggest you get some sleep. The sun is rising and I'm sure you'll want to be at the hospital *first thing*."

Draco looked to Harry with discomfort. "Could I stay here as well, do you think?"

"And wake up with a knife to my throat? I think not." Harry narrowed his eyes, "You can sleep in the wine cellar."

"I want to sleep wherever *you're* sleeping." Draco said too quickly, and then held his breath while he waited for Harry's reply.

"I don't trust you, Malfoy."

"Then take me back to that room. The one where Nikolae sleeps."

"Fine, then. Let's go." Harry left the room and Draco followed.

"Potter?" He asked as they neared the small kitchen, "Get me a blanket. The floor is cold."

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Harry returned to the guest room without a word and returned with a thick comforter under his arm.

Draco, he found, was rummaging through the refrigerator and had a few things out on the counter already. Some fruit, a bottle of soda, and half of a left-over ham sandwich. He added some cookies from a jar near the oven, and then wrapped his finds in a large linen napkin. Carrying it in one hand, Draco led Harry out of the house and down the wooded path.

Draco stood aside as Harry opened the front door. "Are you sure no one can get in?"

"Are you seriously asking me this *again*?" Harry tried to be sarcastic, but couldn't pretend that he didn't see the fear in Draco's eyes. "You're perfectly safe, Malfoy. If anyone is going to kill you, it will be me."

"It isn't death I'm worried about." He stopped to lift a throw pillow from one of the sofas in the atrium. He tested its resilience, nodded his approval, and continued on with it clutched in his hand. "And you *won't* kill me, Potter." His voice dropped to a whisper. "Not even when I ask you to."

Harry opened the door to the room at the end of the labyrinth and Draco went in, turning back to look Harry in the eye. "Tomorrow night, if Voldemort hasn't found me, I'll tell you the rest of the story. Then you can judge me as you see fit."

Harry handed him the blanket and lit the sconce inside the door. He held Malfoy's gaze and almost smiled as he closed it, wishing he had the conviction to either hate Draco Malfoy or forgive him. As the door sealed and the locks clicked shut, Harry realized he could do neither.

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31. In the Dark

When Harry opened the door Draco was sitting cross-legged on the blanket, folded neatly in half like a sleeping bag, eating fried chicken from a plate set atop a case of Finnegan's Swill. He was wearing Harry's clothes and had recently showered. His hair was still damp. Nikolae, Harry saw, was gone. The lid of his sarcophagus pushed aside.

"I had to go to the bathroom for *hours*, Potter." Was how Draco greeted him, "If Nikolae hadn't gotten out of his coffin I'd be *floating* by now." He wiped his hands and abandoned his dinner. "I must say, you are a most inhospitable host."

"I was at St. Mungo's." Harry explained, "I came down here this morning, but you were asleep."

"How are the girls?" He asked with regret.

"Christina is in the cottage. She's tired, but Snape said she would be." Harry closed his eyes as if it hurt to speak. "Sara is no better."

"She will be, Potter." Draco consoled him, "I can hear her thoughts. It's hard sometimes, but she's there."

"What does she say?"

"Nothing. I can't go that deep into her mind. She's dreaming, Potter, or *thinking* I should say because her thoughts are lucid, but I can only see what's on the surface. She *wants* to recover. She knows that you're upset, she can feel it, and she can't stop worrying about you."

Something inside him smiled, though Harry kept a solemn expression. "She's the one who's *sick*, who almost *died* and she's worried about *me*?"

"She's also upset because she never gave you your birthday present and she wonders if you'll like it. Want to know what it is?" Draco grinned, "If you don't want it, I'll take it."

"I'll want it."

"The only other solid thought I got from her was her fear for Christina."

"Christina was asking for you." Harry admitted, "I said I would bring you to see her."

Draco smiled genuinely and stood. "Let's go then." He hesitated, looking down at the old jeans and the blue sweater he was wearing, brought from Harry's closet by Nikolae. "Do I look ok?" He smoothed his hair back and waited for Harry's approval.

"Are you serious?" Harry rolled his eyes, thinking Malfoy *always* looked ok. "Come on, *Fabio*. It's getting late and if you're going to tell me your story then we'd best get to it. I'm running on empty as it is."

"Well? Do I look ok or not?"

Harry almost laughed when he saw Draco really wanted his opinion. "You look like a guy who sleeps in an underground room with a vampire." He grinned, "Come on."

Draco frowned and followed him out.

* * *

Christina smiled when Harry appeared in the open doorway.

"I brought you a visitor, but he's in the bathroom mirror, *combing his hair*." He grinned.

A muffled voice issued from another room. "*Oh shut-up!*"

"Thanks, Harry."

"Don't mention it." He smiled warmly and realized again how much he liked Christina. She was sincere and down-to-earth. "Are you feeling better?"

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"*Much*." She hesitated, "Actually, I'm a little bored." She blushed with apology.

"You're *not* imposing." He smiled and raised his voice, "*He is*, but that's another matter altogether."

The muffled voice bellowed forth once more. "*Shove off, Potter!*"

Harry turned a softer tone to Christina. "Get dressed. Malfoy and I have some things to discuss and it may take awhile, but you can wander around the house if you'd like."

"I'd *love* to!" She said and threw back the covers. She was wearing one of his tee-shirts with his blue and white striped pajama bottoms, baggy and rolled up at the ankles. "I think a bathrobe would do."

Harry disappeared and a moment later Christina heard them arguing in the next room.

Don't give her that! It's ugly!

What's wrong with it?

It's pastel! And feel it! It feels like a dishcloth!

It's Hermione's!

Well, that explains everything!

It's a bathrobe! Not a ball-gown!

Where's Sara's? At least she has good taste.

It's at the hospital, of course. Here, it's long, but it's not pastel.

Is that Weasel's robe, Potter? I wouldn't put that on a flubberworm!

Coming from someone who has monogrammed slippers?

Did Sara pick yours out?

I think so, yes.

Then get that. As long as you didn't pick it.

There was the sound of a closet door sliding back and then the scrape of a hanger. Christina tried hard to hide her amusement. She was beginning to understand what Sara meant when she'd said they were friends, but that they didn't actually like each other.

She rose from the bed, achy and tired, but bubbling with excitement. Severus had told her about the house next door, about the courtyard full of purple flowers, the fountain and the statue of Frodo Baggins. She's been dreaming about standing on top of a three story tower and dropping pebbles into the ocean far below, wondered what it would be like to swim lazily in the solarium, or to see where the house spilled out onto the marble terrace that Severus had described so well for her. She'd been romanticizing about it all day and was glad when Harry reappeared with a blue cotton bathrobe, which he held out to her.

* * *

If there was a hottest night of the year, it had to be the first of August. The heat rose from the city in waves that brushed like whispers across his skin and it was an agreeable sensation, like being caressed by nature itself. As he walked the streets of London the Vampire was at peace with the world, forgetting his mortal friends and the evils that haunted his memory. His detached smile and nostalgic gaze brought calm upon the hearts of those who passed him on the sidewalk. He looked at everything and nothing, finding beauty in the smallest of details and also in the bustle of noise, the lights, and the merriment spilling out of the pubs. He reveled in the majesty of the old London he had once known well and still found mirrored in the architecture of this newer version.

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A lot of the shops were closed, but Nikolae looked through every plate of glass and studied every display with a mere glance. He could smell the blood of mortals and it was strong with so many of them around. If he was a younger vampire he would have been consumed by the bloodlust by now, but he was ancient and it had about as much affect on him as the heat. It was simply there, humming just below the world around him. He also smelled soap, fumes from the passing cars, salty popcorn wafting out from the old movie-house across the street and the odor of stale ale that drifted from the

pubs. And also cigarette smoke.

Following the blue-gray tendrils, he found a woman standing behind him, watching a television set through a nearby shop window. She was around forty years old, Nikolae guessed; wearing cheap clothing and shoes, her hair was badly maintained and gray down her confused center part. Slung on her shoulder was a well-used bag all scuffed and overflowing with odds and ends. She had a nonsense air in her presence, though her face was careworn and friendly. Nikolae immediately assumed she was a working mother with several children and home was her destination after a long day of labor. She wore no wedding ring. The woman held her cigarette casually as she watched the late news, occasionally taking a drag and then blowing the smoke out in a soft cloud. Nikolae came to stand beside her.

"It ain't come on yet." She said without turning to see who it was.

Nikolae was instantly curious. Apparently, there was currently a muggle news story so profound it needed no introduction. Something big had happened and he could only wonder if the news was good or bad. The solemn expression she wore was the only answer he needed.

"Terrible thing ain't it?" she spoke with a soft, gentle voice, "*All those people*. I can't even *imagine*. It don't seem possible."

"Forgive my ignorance, missus, but to what do you refer?"

"You mean to tell me you ain't heard?" She finally turned to face him and backed away a step. Her manner became nervous and uncertain, though her eyes still conveyed the fact that she couldn't believe there was a single person on the British Isle who *didn't know*. "The Eli Hampton Hospital?"

"Again, forgive me. I have been ill and have only just now ventured out."

"Sorry to hear." She said and turned her nervous eyes back to stare through the glass, waiting for the advertisements to end and the news to begin. "They think it was some kind of gas or something, but they ain't detected anything. Not yet anyway. They got the place all roped off, men in spacesuits bringin' out the dead. Fourteen hundred people we're talking about. Everybody in the place."

"*Everyone?*"

"They say an ambulance brought someone in around three in the morning and found 'em all. Doctors, nurses, patients, everyone there." She sighed heavily, her voice cracking with emotion. "My youngest was in there just last week. It could have been him, but I guess I gotta be thankful. Lot of other people lost their kids last night. Lucky mine wasn't one of them." She wiped away a stray tear and closed her eyes for a moment.

"Thank the Gods for that."

"I only know of one God, but where was *He* when deadly gas was filling the maternity ward? Where was *God* when hundreds of men lost their wives *and* their babies in a moment's time?"

"Welcoming them to the Heavens, dear lady."

She turned and gave the vampire a warm smile, her eyes brimming with tears.

Nikolae pulled a thick roll of pound notes from his pocket and pressed it into her hand. "I hope the young one is well. Good night to you."

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When she saw what she held in her hand, more money than she'd make all year, the woman dropped her cigarette and turned to find the strange man who'd been ill, only he had vanished in seconds, as if he hadn't really been there at all, but the money was real, as real as the hand that held it, and so must have been the man. "*Dear God.*" she whispered.

* * *

Snuggled into their respective seats before the fire, Harry eagerly awaited the rest of Draco's tale, but did his best to hide the fact. Draco rested his head on a throw pillow, staring up at the ceiling. He sipped his rum and sighed.

"One night a beautiful girl with auburn hair brought me a mug of hot cocoa with Irish cream and peppermint. She sat with me and talked while I drank it and I fell for it head first. After months and months of ugly Death Eaters, cold dungeons, anger and despair, it was as if a little piece of the warm August sun had walked in and smiled at me. She had a nice laugh, you know, soft and easy. The kind that melts your defenses in seconds."

"You're *spineless*, Malfoy!" Harry chuckled, smiling. "What a sap!"

"Oh shove off, *Potter*." Draco said without conviction, "Tell me Sara didn't turn you into a total jellyfish."

Harry laughed a little and then sighed with the memory. He was standing in Sara's tower the night they'd met, drunk on Riesling and completely fascinated by her. She stood so close he could hear her breathe. So close her clothes brushed against his and then her hand had touched his face with such affection that Harry was moved by it, his heart thumping wildly in his chest as her thumb brushed so lightly across his scar, an arduous caress that left him deeply touched. A *jellyfish*, he thought, was an understatement. "Are you kidding? She asked me to spend the night and I said no." Harry grinned, knowing this was not entirely true.

"Yeah right!" Draco laughed. He thought a minute, and then changed his mind. "On second thought, Sir Galahad, you probably tried to be *polite*."

"We're not all *Slytherins*, Malfoy. Of course I would treat Sara honorably."

"Let me guess, you didn't end up leaving."

Harry grinned. "I didn't"

Draco smirked, then something occurred to him and his brow furrowed in confusion. "I thought she was holding out for marriage or some nonsense like that?"

"She talked to you about our... *our private life?!?*"

"No Potter, she didn't. No matter how hard I tried to trick her into telling me." He grinned, "Pansy Parkinson heard it from Padma Patil, who's twin sister Parvati shared a room with Granger. I had to give Pansy ten galleons before she'd tell me."

"*Hermione?*"

"The girl never *shuts up*, Potter. And she's overly defensive. If you want to know something, just come at her with accusatory false information and she's *sure* to correct you. One can find out practically *anything* through Granger with a little cleverness."

Harry gave him a stern glance and a half smile. "Auburn hair, nice laugh..."

"Ah yes, *the vixen*," he sneered. "Well, the drink was laced with Veritas serum."

"You don't say."

"I should have known better than to trust a *redhead*."

Harry shot him a warning glance, thinking of Draco's dislike for the Weasley's.

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"It didn't really matter in the end, I guess. If Voldemort had walked in and said 'here, drink this Veritas serum' I'd have knocked it back like a shot of dragon's blood. It was all part of the conditioning. I'd have taken that Veritas one way or the other and I was so scared of the lessons that I did what I was told without hesitation."

"What did she get out of you?"

"She seduced me, not that I needed seducing, but I told her anything she wanted to know. It was a strong potion. I could hold nothing back, but even if I could I probably wouldn't have. There wasn't really much that they didn't already know, but I told her about the butterflies."

"Butterflies?"

"I'm terrified of them. One landed on my arm when I was a little kid." Draco cringed, "They're deceptive. All one sees is the beauty of their wings, but as I looked at it, I noticed that the wings are attached to a hideous insect with creepy little spider legs and those *feelers*. The only way to describe my reaction is total revulsion. I screamed and crushed it, knocked it to the ground where smeared it into the dirt. I had nightmares for years afterward where they're all over me, crawling all over my skin." Draco shuddered and rubbed his arms.

Harry laughed out loud. "You have *nightmares* about *butterflies?!?*" He laughed again, "You're kidding!"

"I'm not. And if you don't stop laughing I'll deliver that broken nose I've been promising since 7th year." He threatened from where he lay, once again in the library.

"I'm sorry, but that's hardly profound. *So what* if Voldemort knows you're afraid of *butterflies*." Harry snickered.

"Go ahead, laugh it up. You're not the one they did it to." He shuddered again with the memory.

"You're not the one who woke up strapped to a table and covered with insects a week later." He closed his eyes as his lip trembled and he whispered painfully. "They were *crawling* all over my *face*."

For a moment, Harry thought Malfoy was going to cry, but then he brushed it off and continued.

"It wasn't the only thing she found out." Draco sighed. "At last Voldemort knew the one thing I vowed to keep from him and had always managed to hide."

Harry had once again grown serious. "What was it?"

"He finally learned of my *affinity* for Sara." Draco told him, "Not completely, as I said I was very bitter toward Sara and blamed her exclusively for my demise. I talked at length of how I hated her, but also of how I'd once loved her. Of course, it was knowledge he would eventually use against me."

"The redhead, I don't recall if she ever told me her name, slipped away in the night. At least I think it was night. It's dark all the time down there and that's just when I was told to sleep. Anyway, Voldemort brought me my breakfast and told me to eat it. I assumed there was some potion in it but ate it anyway. I was shocked when nothing happened. My skin didn't start to crawl. My muscles didn't spasm, my bones didn't even hurt. Nothing. The food was good, cold roast chicken and fried potatoes. It was the best tasting thing I'd ever had. At least I thought so then."

Harry sipped his drink and snuggled deeper into the sofa, pulling a light throw up around his chest. He said nothing and waited for Malfoy to go on.

"When I was done, I followed him through a few tunnels, confused when we by-passed all the usual training rooms, and finally he stopped at a door with no exterior lock. Inside was a moderate chamber with a clean bed, a table, a desk, and its own lavatory. He told me that the training was over, but that a different sort of lessons would begin the next day. This caused me some concern, but he shocked me further by returning my wand to me and leaving."

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"I've never felt such relief. I think I fell on the bed and cried out of pure gratitude. Never in my life had I known humility, but I knew it then. I knew what it meant to have the things I've had in my life, wealth, clean clothes, and a bed to sleep on, decent food even. I'd learned to appreciate even the smallest show of kindness. It made me feel loathsome, weak, and *pathetic*, and I hated myself for it. And of course, I hated Sara even more. Funny, though, the more I hated her, the more I realized how much I cared for her, how desperately I wanted to see her, forgive her, and make it all go away. It was confusing to be so divided."

"There were candles and torches for light and I soon found a small shelf full of Dark Arts books, the really obscure ones, not even in the Restricted Section at Hogwarts. They contained pure evil, and I read them all by the end of two weeks. It was part of the new training. It seems I was conditioned

enough in Voldemort's eyes and so I was made to learn the Dark Arts. The only problem was I couldn't do most of it. It simply wouldn't work. It made no sense to me at all. I've done lots of Dark spells under my father's instruction and I was a very able student in school. Anyway, that's irrelevant. "My door was never locked, except by me, and so I often wandered the catacombs, looking for a way out. I tried to tunnel out with my wand a week after getting the new room, only Voldemort caught me and I was tortured for several hours before going unconscious. When I awoke I was covered in butterflies. All I can say is that I preferred the torture." Draco swallowed hard. "I spent a month back in the cell, but then I was returned to the bigger room, given back my wand, and I set to wandering again. I would continue to do so for another 5 months.

"During that time things changed for the better. I was sometimes asked my opinion. I was included in planning meetings and sat at the Dark Lord's right hand with Wormtail on his other side. I was given fresh clothes from my house, which was nice because I had been wearing the same ones since I'd arrived. Every once in awhile I would say the wrong thing and end up in the cell again, but for the most part, the Death Eaters began to show me respect."

* * *

"The potion is ready." Wormtail announced from the open doorway. "They are waiting."

"And it's about time," said the Dark Lord as he stood and crossed the small chamber, passing the ugly little man, who bowed his head as his master lead the way to the laboratory. Wormtail hurried along behind him, wringing his hands in anticipation. Voldemort did not pause at the door; he threw it open without slowing his pace. He spoke the moment he entered the lab and his voice resonated impatience. The two people present, an old man who had the look of a mad scientist and a beautiful young girl, looked up directly. The assistant quickly smoothed back her hair and straightened her robe. The potions master turned his thick glasses on Voldemort.

"We are ready." He said and held out a knarled old hand.

Voldemort withdrew a vial from his cloak and it was eagerly accepted. The pair set to work at once.

"This is barely half of what we need. Not that I complain, but a full vial will render the potion *full strength*."

"It will have to suffice. Proceed as planned." Voldemort directed and turned to the assistant, "You have the hair?"

She smiled and gestured at a clear glass vial with several pale hairs inside. "I have."

Voldemort gave a sinister smile. "I would never allow the Elemental to marry my sworn enemy. They must know this, they must be expecting some sort of attack, but they'll never expect *this*."

"Yes..." Wormtail wrung his hands at his master's side. "So silent, so *subtle*. By the time Potter realizes what happened it will be too late. *If* he realizes it." Wormtail chuckled. "*Brilliant*, Master. Using something that's already there, turning it to our advantage. It's *seamless*."

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Voldemort smiled again and gave no reply. He watched with interest as the potion was mixed with the blood of the Elemental, he stepped forward to cast the spell, and when he was done the redhead sprinkled the platinum hairs across the surface. A great plume of misty red smoke rose to form a cloud above the cauldron. An image appeared in this cloud, Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter, arguing in an empty library. A reddish-black swirl turned next into what appeared to be a dream state. The images were of the Carpathian Mountains in Romania. The home of Vanya Ivanova in the village of Keltsetia, to be precise. "The Elemental sleeps." He said and smiled. The Dark Lord aimed his wand and spoke.

* * *

"By the time I escaped I was beside myself with boredom. I had done all that was asked of me, followed the rules and held my tongue to the best of my ability. I watched the others come and go as they pleased and felt like an outcast and a prisoner, the way Morgio must have felt. I was desperate to get out of there and no longer cared if I lived or died. I only cared about seeing the sun or the night sky. I needed to feel the wind again, smell the grass, to hear the sounds of a normal world. I had been held in the catacombs for nearly a year. I had been partially brainwashed, tortured, starved, isolated, beaten, and was well on my way to madness. I remember thinking I would trade all that I owned for a single ride on my broom as I wandered the tunnels, lost, thirsty, and without hope of salvation.

"I was thinking about Sara again, but my thoughts eventually turned to you. I thought about how I hated you for leaving me there, but in reality I didn't hate you any more than I hated *her*. I knew what I asked was impossible, but I was so desperate for freedom that I guess I'd hoped you would find a way." Draco paused and a sincere smile touched his lips. "The truth of it is, you *did* save me, Potter. However indirect it may have been."

Harry looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"I used your '*point me*' trick to find the way out."

"That's actually Hermione's, but glad I could help." He smiled.

"I didn't bother going far, just collapsed in the grass, overcome with relief and relishing my selfliberation for as long as I could. Imagine my surprise when I was handed my broom and sent home, where I hadn't been for so long."

"There had to be a catch."

"Of course there was a catch! I was given orders naturally, and was likewise expected to carry them out. I was to retrieve and deliver to Voldemort two spell books. Weasel's obviously, and Sara's. That was the first plan. Soon after Voldemort rescinded that order and decided it was best if I was not included in the attacks on Sara. Whether it was because I was taking so long getting Weasel's book

that he thought I should focus on that entirely or he was unsure of how I would deal with it, I don't know. He never explained himself to me, but I started running out of excuses and after awhile I began to look incompetent. Plus, scores of Death Eaters and Voldemort's foreign allies were being killed or captured by Sara and repeated failure on my end was something he was loath to tolerate. At some point I knew I would have to stop tossing flats and seriously try to steal it. So, I devised the polyjuice plan and bided my time. You know the rest of that story, so I won't bore you with the details, but I narrowly escaped punishment when Voldemort learned that I'd lost the book, even though I was handing it to him. Potter, you don't understand what would have happened to me had you not gotten the book back from Sara."

"I think I have a good idea." Harry said, wishing he could tell Malfoy about the duplicate books, but thought better of it. Maybe someday, when the Mark was but a memory.

"Now that he had Weasel's book, Voldemort decided to put me with three of his henchmen and send us to Austria, only to intercept a train bound for France. I tried to tell him this made no sense, that we could just go to France and meet this train, but he told me never again to second guess him and reminded me that I was not my father and that my opinion was irrelevant.

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"We were to leave at once. One of his spies had sent an urgent owl from Russia, where Sara was at the time, detailing the departure of Greg Sanders, who carried Sara's spell book. We were to take his billfold and make it look like a robbery. I was uneasy from the start. To begin with, I detested the three I was to travel with, but I didn't see the *point* in killing Sara's muggle assistant. He was sure to have valuable information and he had nothing to do with it, really. He was nothing more than a currier who was asked to deliver the book to a third party, who would in turn submit it to the Ministry for safekeeping. It would have been simple just to take it from him, but Voldemort wanted a little revenge."

Harry was visibly upset, his eyes angry and trained on Draco. "Mr. Sanders was a *good man*, Malfoy. I hope you're proud of yourself."

"I *said* I didn't want to do it! And I *didn't*!" Draco defended. "I was the *lookout*, Potter. It doesn't exonerate me, I know, but there was nothing else I could do." He hesitated, "I'm sorry."

Harry leapt to his feet. "Did it ever occur to you to *help him*?" he shouted, "You could have easily blindsided the others. I know you have the ability, and with your wand *already in hand* no less! You could have rescued him, brought him to Hogwarts or just plain *RAN!*"

"You don't just *stand up* to Voldemort, Harry. Haven't you heard a word I've said?" Draco shouted back, "How far would I have gotten? Think about that Potter. How long before they contacted Voldemort? Twenty minutes? Maybe an hour?"

"That's plenty of time."

"You just don't get it do you?"

"Call Nikolae. Tell him to come home."

Draco's eyes slid closed, his brow creased with concentration and then relaxed. He looked again at Harry. "Ten minutes he said. He's with Dumbledore and he seemed... *troubled*."

"He's with Dumbledore? At *Hogwarts*?"

"That's what I said, Potter."

Harry drew his wand and annunciated the same leg locking spell Malfoy had placed on Seamus first year. Draco was unable to stand or walk and would have to remain as he was until Harry returned.

"When Nikolae gets here tell him I've gone to see Sara and will be back soon."

"You're going *now*? I was just getting started!"

"Dumbledore always tells me that if I feel violent I should walk away for awhile and right now I feel like killing you."

"I had no choice! Why can't you understand?"

"I'll *never* understand." Harry admitted, "I could never understand killing good, innocent people to spare yourself, no matter *what* the circumstances! Greg Sanders was my *friend*, Malfoy!" Harry stormed from the room before he could lose his temper completely. A nice, furious ride on his Lightning Mach 2 sounded like the perfect thing and he couldn't wait to take flight.

* * *

Dumbledore paced his office, stroking his beard and ignoring the chatter of the many portraits the walls held. His focus was entirely on Nikolae and the dilemma at hand. Finally he came to a stop and faced the vampire. "We have gotten word that there may be an attack on Harry and Sara's wedding. Voldemort knows we expect this, of course, so whatever he has in mind will be something we wouldn't think to suspect. Sabotage of some sort I would guess. One thing that's apparent to me, Nikolae, is that he's certain it will work and that's troubling indeed."

"You have an informant on the inside?"

"Two, actually. The only problem is that they function as one. They're joined at the hip, I'm afraid.

Figuratively speaking."

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"What other news did they bring?"

"Nothing noteworthy."

"Tell me."

"There was something about a meeting they were having this coming Friday and a bit about Voldemort spending time in his potions lab the past few days." As soon as he said it, the wise old man realized he had missed something. "We need Severus Snape."

"Yes, he may lend some insight." Nikolae agreed, "As for Lord Voldemort, what are we to do? Is the Order ready to act? It seems last time we convened there were agreements yet to be reached."

"We are ready; we only need to find a way to draw him out. We've had our own scouts out for *two years* looking to find his lair, but to no avail. We've even tried sending letters to him and following the owls, but they always get lost."

"I don't think I have to tell you what you need."

Dumbledore sighed, his eyes grim and serious. "*Live bait.*"

"Exactly. Now only one question remains." Nikolae said, "*Who is it going to be?*"

Sara awoke in the dim of her hospital room to the familiar rhythm of breathing, the rise and fall of his chest and the warmth of his arms around her were welcome comforts after the strange dream she'd had. His presence calmed her, chased the images from her mind. "*Harry.*" She whispered.

"I didn't mean to wake you. I just missed you is all."

"I missed you too." She told him, "I feel your absence, even in my sleep." She breathed deep and sighed as she exhaled. "You smell like the wind."

Harry smiled in the dark. "How do you feel?"

"Fine, now that you're with me."

"You're not well, Sara. Tell me how you *really* are."

"*Wretched.*" She admitted, "I'm tired, Harry. I just need to rest. Don't worry."

"Easier said than done. We're *all* worried about you."

Sara gasped with sudden memory and turned her eyes to Harry. "*Christina!*"

"She's fine. She's at the house with Malfoy."

"Oh thank God." She sighed with immense relief and relaxed against him, exhausted. "How is Draco?" she asked, hesitant and unnaturally casual.

"Lucky to be alive." Harry replied as his eyes darkened with anger. "He's been telling me his story for two nights now."

"Do you understand why I couldn't let you curse him Harry? Did he tell you what they *did* to him?"

"Most of it, but I would have cursed him anyway had I known it in advance. He deserves to die for what he did, Sara. I would gladly kill *anyone* who hurt you and he tried to do something much worse than 'hurt' and in the name of *Lord Voldemort!*" He told her, breathing deep to control the rage that had erupted inside him. "There's a lot more to Malfoy than money, charm, and a pretty face, you know. He tried to kill you to save *himself* from some *curses and threats*. Keep that in mind."

"That *isn't* why he did it. Don't judge him just yet."

"I'm so *sick* of Malfoy! Let's talk about something else or nothing at all."

"Well, I did have a dream about our wedding while I was asleep. Only it seemed more like a vision."

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"Do I look good in a tux?" He grinned and ran his fingers through her long, messy hair, smoothing it back from her face.

"*Definitely.*" She smiled and slipped her fingers under his shirt to caress his skin, her voice already losing strength, her words a sleepy whisper. "There were only a few people there. Our attendants, Severus, Minerva, The Weasleys," she hesitated, "a few others. Uncle Albus performed the ceremony. We weren't at Hogwarts, either. We were outside."

"Well, that sounds like a dream to me. We wouldn't go changing everything *now.*"

"True. That's what I thought as well. It was just so *vivid.*"

"Sometimes a dream is just a dream." He kissed her hair and pulled her closer. "Now rest, Sara. I'll stay with you until you're asleep. And don't worry. One of us is always here and you're in a highly warded room, guarded by aurors."

"Go back to Draco." She whispered, her heavy eyes falling closed. "*Listen* to him. And know that he is about to find out that it was all for nothing." Sara warned, suddenly flooded by images and understanding. "He still has one promise to fulfill. One debt to repay. The most important of all."

"What is it?" He asked, but Sara had drifted off. Her soft breath deep and even. Harry stayed with her another twenty minutes, thinking about this new revelation as she slept against his chest, his chin resting against the top of her head. Her hand lay listless inside his shirt, her warm fingers unmoving against his back. His troubled thoughts were calm as he felt the comfort that could only come from the nearness of Sara. The Amoridon radiated against him and he kissed her before slipping away.

Harry found Nikolae waiting for him in the front lobby when he entered the house, casually pacing the floor. "You're dragging your feet." He said when Harry gave him a tired greeting. "I heard your approach several minutes ago."

"It's been a long night." Harry sighed. "Sara woke up. We talked for a few minutes, but she fell back to sleep."

"Good." He said, "She needs it."

They had reached the library where Harry was surprised to see Draco up and walking around, the leglocking curse having been removed. He spoke quietly with Christina while Dumbledore relaxed in front of the fire.

"Professor!" Harry said, "What are you doing here?"

"I have called a meeting of the Order, set for tomorrow evening, but I wanted to speak to you first. We are waiting on Severus."

"Who will stay with Sara?"

"Moody."

"Good." Harry said and took a seat across from Dumbledore, "Let me take Malfoy back downstairs." Dumbledore lowered his voice to a whisper, his eyes on Draco and Christina, who had wandered into the hall and were looking at a painting there. "Leave him here for now."

"But-"

"Harry," Dumbledore explained, "He *won't* run away."

* * *

Harry left the brief meeting, already struggling with a decision that he'd barely begun to make. Snape had arrived and so Harry went to find Draco, irritated at having been excluded from the latter conversation. They were in *his house* after all! He *hated* being left in the dark.

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"Christina," Harry said when he found them sharing a couch in the library, "Could I steal Malfoy from you again?"

"Of course!" She smiled, "I was just getting to the solarium when Draco found me. Are you sure you don't mind me poking around?"

"Not at all." He smiled, but Christina thought it was a grave and sad expression. "We'll find you."

Christina gave Draco a brilliant smile and left the room, barely meeting Harry's eyes, afraid of what misery she might find there.

He took a seat on the opposite sofa with a resigned and heavy sigh. "Malfoy," he said, "You need to tell me the rest of your story. Things have changed. I need to hear it now."

"Alright." Draco said with downcast eyes, the lingering smile he'd given Christina fading as he realized the implications of what Harry was saying. The seriousness of his situation returned to him as he looked in Potter's eyes. It was something he had let slip beneath the surface. He took a deep breath and began to speak. "The incident on the train set me back a bit with Voldemort, even though I had advanced in other ways as a Death Eater. He knew what was on my mind. He knew I'd been a coward about it, refusing to take part, going along with it with minimal dedication to the cause. He began at that point to put the squeeze on me. He grew less tolerant by the minute. He left me alone for a few days, but then I was called."

"When Sara came home."

"Yes. I saw the four of you in the Criterion having lunch. I was there already. For some reason I wanted quite badly to go there, even though I wasn't hungry at all and did not yet know I was a telepath. All I can figure is that Sara's thoughts had reached me somehow. I wanted to talk to her, but after all that had happened I didn't know how. I wanted it to be a private moment. I didn't want to discuss her murdering my father in front of you and your friends. So I concealed myself as well as I could and waited. I followed her all day, but never once was she alone. I just wanted a few minutes, but I couldn't walk up and ask. What I didn't know was that Voldemort's spies were following *me*. That's how he learned of her return."

"That was a month ago!"

"I know. When I was called he first sent me for a lesson in obedience when I said I knew nothing about Sara's coming home. Of course I was lying through my teeth, but in my time away from the catacombs I had grown resentful toward him again and defiant. Killing the muggle did that to me. If I kill a man, Potter, it will be because it's my choice to do so, not because Voldemort can't do his own dirty work. I was bitter and angry over having been a part of that. I was angry over having to beg you for the book when I had no personal interest in it. It was fun getting the Weasels to throw me off the property, but other than that I felt helpless and used. And I was sick of it. When he mentioned Sara to me I laughed in his face. That's what led to this very moment, Potter. I told him right exactly where to put his orders. How stupid I was, how *foolish*."

"What happened?"

"Originally, he wanted me to lead her into a trap. Coerce her to come to my house where she would be ambushed and captured. I was to give her a sleeping potion and just let them overtake her. That's a laugh. But the truth of it is, I would rather kill her than hand her over to Voldemort. It's what she would have wanted, to die rather than be used as a weapon by your enemy. Little did I know that's exactly what he had in mind. He gave me a choice that day and sent me home to consider it. It was unthinkable, this choice, as it seemed I could do neither."

"What was it? What was the choice?"

"I had to kill someone." Draco sighed, "Sara obviously, or you."

"Me?"

"Yes. He didn't care which I chose, but choosing wasn't an issue. It *had* to be Sara."

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"Why her? Why not me?"

"Because Sara can't kill Voldemort. *You can*."

Harry just sat there, disbelief in his slack-jawed expression and understanding emerging in his mind. Draco had chosen to save *him*, Harry Potter, his arch-nemesis, who he'd always hated, who had been the focus of most of Draco's evil plans and practical jokes through seven years at Hogwarts. Malfoy had chosen to save *him*, even though it meant killing the girl Draco loved most. The only person he'd ever called his friend with conviction. Harry didn't know what to say.

"I tried everything to get out of it. I stalled in every manner possible. I was dying to see her, but I couldn't risk contact with her. I was expected to carry out my orders and so I stood her up at the restaurant, even though I'd planned to go in and then say she was being guarded when she emerged

alive, but I found I couldn't face her. Not while knowing what I knew. I also didn't want to risk having him pass the job off to someone else who would have no reservations about carrying it out."

"Understandable."

"I became obsessed with seeing Sara after that. I knew I shouldn't have avoided her when I'd had the chance. She dominated my every thought. I dreamed of her at night. I felt her mental hand, just barely touching my mind before retreating, as if she felt wrong about forcing contact on me. She wanted to know if I hated her, this I knew. She wanted forgiveness for what she'd done to me. It wasn't that she was dying to spend time with me, Harry, which I'm sure must have crossed your mind, she simply needed to know where we stood. She needed to know if she still had a friend.

"It was through Christina that I managed to find your house. After weeks of searching the coast on my broom, I got a brilliant idea, got some muggle money, and hailed a taxi. I got in and asked the driver to take me to the Golden Fish. I thought for certain he would just pull away from the curb and deposit me in front of the place at some point, but instead he asked for an address. I didn't know what he was talking about, so he suggested I try looking it up in the phone book. If not for Christina, I'd probably still be wondering what a phone book was."

"So you found it? The house I mean?"

"Of course I did. It wasn't hard once I knew where to look. I remembered the way once I saw the fish place. The only problem was you were having a party and there were all kinds of people there. I couldn't just come to the door and wouldn't have anyway. Even though she was right there in the window, speaking silently to me, asking me to see her, I was too afraid. I told her what I'd come to say and left without giving her the most important of answers. However, I don't regret what I did. I could never look her in the eye and tell her everything was ok. It wasn't. Far from it.

"Two days later I found Christina gravely ill, sleeping beneath a bunch of trash on the roof of this little pizza shop near my house. I'd barely gotten her home when I was called. I ignored the searing pain in my arm just long enough to get Snape to come look after her.

"He held me in the training rooms for five straight days. I mean it when I say I've never felt such agony. I nearly died a few times I think, but of course they always pulled me back from that particular edge. I nearly gave up completely, died by will alone, when Voldemort put a stop to it. I was dragged to my feet to stand before him. At this point he reminded me of the consequences of failing in my duties and elaborated on his threat. At first he'd simply said that if I did not carry out his order, if I did not kill Sara, then he would launch an attack on a large number of muggles, at least a thousand, and kill them all. This slaughter would then be linked to you and your identity would be made known to the muggle authorities. This night he showed me a photograph of a children's hospital. I was horrified. I don't know why. I've never cared one way or the other about muggles, but this was just...

unthinkable. I was reminded again of my orders and given 24 hours to carry them out."

"My God." Harry whispered, trying to grasp the idea of it. A children's hospital, slaughtered in his name. 'Unthinkable' was a gentle euphemism.

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"You should have killed me, Harry. There was a lot more at stake than just Sara." Draco sighed, "I did what I was told to do. I pointed my wand and said the words. They saw me do it, but the fact that it didn't work may or may not constitute failure in Voldemort's eyes. I don't know."

"He would have *known* you didn't want to kill her. It sounds like he set you up to fail, Malfoy. And by doing so you would effectively ostracize yourself from all of us."

"But I *meant* to kill her. I meant to all the way up until I got the pensieve you sent me. It was that memory that saved her, Potter. Once I remembered what it was like to be close to her, to see her smile just for me, it was all over. Sara was the only person who has ever reached the part of me that can laugh out loud at silly jokes and she was so *good* Harry. She would have died to protect me and I knew it. How could I ever harm this person who I cherished above all others? Killing my father could never tarnish that memory. No matter what she does, no matter how she hurts me, I will love her for the *friend* she was until the day I die."

"But you still tried! You left her for dead in Diagon Alley!"

"I had no choice." Draco said. He looked Harry in the eye, then got up and left the room. Harry had a sudden urge to stop him, but, remembering Dumbledore's assurance, he let the words fall away and turned his troubled eyes to the fire.

* * *

Sara awoke to a familiar face beside the bed as the rich, golden light of late evening spilled in through the window to glow amber in his silver hair and beard. A soft smile lit her lips and she rubbed her eyes. "Uncle Albus." She said with a dry, sleep laden voice, "How are you?"

"I should be asking *you* that, my dear. You've given us all quite a scare, you know." He straightened in his seat so to better hear her reply, for her words came only with effort and drifted languidly to his ears.

"I'll be ok. I'm sorry if I've caused anyone concern." She smiled with reassurance and slid her hand across the sheet to take the old knarled one that rested there. "Where is Draco?" she asked, and then horror crept into her expression as remnants of the pleasant dream she'd been having made its way into waking speech. "I, um...I mean where's *Harry*?"

"Harry?" Dumbledore sighed, "Harry had a difficult decision to make and I think he's angry with me for it. He's at Grimmauld Place with the others. They're expecting me soon, but there is something I need to talk to you about." He hesitated and she waited for him to continue. "This is a hard thing for me to ask, Sara, but I need you to keep this from Harry."

Sara turned her eyes to the ceiling for a moment as she considered the idea. "I trust your judgment. I give you my word." She agreed with a hint of reluctance, "But if he asks me, Uncle, I won't lie to him."

"Agreed." Dumbledore sighed and reclined against the back of his chair, wondering how to begin.

* * *

Harry wandered the courtyard, more troubled than he'd ever been over Malfoy. Of all the choices he had concerning Draco, this was the most unthinkable. The cruelest, most shocking solution possible. It was also the one thing he had completely ruled out as an option. However, it was the will of both Dumbledore and Nikolae, not to mention the Order. He could do nothing except comply and he'd already done so at the meeting. After all the opposition to Harry holding Draco accountable for his actions, now they wanted his punishment to be severe. Harry had listened to what Draco told him, he understood the horror he'd endured and why Draco had done what he'd done. The anger was still there, it was impossible to comprehend, but Harry had wanted to save Malfoy from his terrible fate for far too long.

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Sara had returned only two hours before and was fast asleep already, but she was doing well, better than anyone had expected, and Harry knew she was looking forward to talking with Draco, who was currently in the solarium with his new friend. Christina was another reason Harry had hoped to keep Draco at the house. They'd obviously made some kind of connection. Harry had only seen Malfoy light up the way he did when she entered the room very few times, and *every* time it had been when he'd met with Sara's presence. Harry wanted Draco and Christina to spend time together. Maybe then he would turn away from Sara. Focus on someone else.

Harry looked up at the steadfast image of Frodo and sighed. "What would *you* do?"

He waited a moment, hearing only the sound of the salty breeze rustling through the lilac trees and the muffled splash of the Channel against the rocks. "That's what I thought." He said and lay down on the marble bench, lacing his fingers across his chest. Harry looked to the sky for answers, knowing there would be none.

* * *

Sara awoke to the light of the moon shining in on all sides. She realized she was in the tower loft in the new house and smiled when she did not see the familiar ceiling of her hospital room.

Once again it was Draco who had haunted her dreams and Sara couldn't help but wonder why he was so heavy on her mind. *Perhaps*, she thought, *it was premonitory?* The only problem was it didn't feel much like foreboding.

Sara climbed slowly to her feet and slipped on a light summer robe Harry had laid out for her beside the bed. The little flying carpet her Uncle Albus had brought lay on the floor at her feet and she stepped onto it, hoping Christina wouldn't cross her path. Having a muggle around was painstaking enough without having to explain why you're hovering around on a small rug. To avoid such a disastrous encounter, Sara reached out with her mental hand until she found Draco. It was clear he'd been startled. Whatever was foremost on his mind was immediately whisked away and hidden from her.

You're awake! He thought, his surprise apparent, *How are you?*

I want to see you.

Draco hesitated, watching Christina wander about the room, relating a story about a play she'd once been in. *Right now?*

If it suits you.

I'll be right up.

No. She told him, *Meet me on the terrace.*

She was already there when he arrived and his smile betrayed the partiality he had only for Sara. She looked tired, sitting on the little flying carpet as if it was a bench or a swing. "You look better." He said, "You've got some color back. I swear you were as pale as it gets. It was rather frightening." He helped her to stand and she did not let go of his hand. She kept hold of it lightly, as if without thought. Draco didn't mind.

"So much has happened since we met in Diagon Alley." She said, "I'm glad to see you got through it ok."

"I'm just glad you're alright, Sara." He squeezed her hand, "You should be in bed."

"I know." She admitted, "Severus would have a fit if he knew, but I needed to see you."

"What about?"

"I'm really not sure to be honest."

"Is everything ok? You look flustered."

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"I just missed you I guess."

"Well, *who wouldn't?*"

Sara grinned at the smug sarcasm she'd almost forgotten. "Your arrogance is still disarming, *Malfoy*." He smiled his apology and his expression once again grew serious. "I missed you, too, Sara. You're the only real friend I've ever had." His hand found her hair and his fingers caressed the silken tresses, so much like his own. His heart swelled with love for her, and then he remembered she was to be married on Saturday and let his hand fall away.

"The last time we spent together as friends was the night I came to you in the Slytherin dorms." Sara reflected, "That night seems like a *lifetime* ago. It's been too long, Draco." She placed her free hand over his shirt and pressed the pendant he still wore against his chest, the one she'd placed around his

neck that very night. He'd kept it hidden beneath his shirt ever since. The Amidon grew considerably warmer until it burned against his skin, radiating comfort and serenity throughout his body. "I thought I'd never see you again, Sara." He kissed her cheek, "I don't deserve to."

Sara's hand left the Amidon and moved to rest against his face. "At last we can be friends again. If only you'll forgive me."

Draco pulled her into an embrace, relieved and overwhelmed to finally say the words. To say them out loud, to say them *now*, to Sara, allowed the anger he'd held inside for so long to fade away into nothing, replaced only by the warmth he felt at her touch.

When she finally pulled away there was something new in her eyes, something he'd never noticed before and he could see her trembling, could feel her hand shaking against his. Her expression was a mix of confusion, relief, and something else. That strange new something that affected him beyond his understanding. His breath caught in his throat and his heart started thumping away in his chest. She moved to speak, but said nothing.

"What are you thinking about?" He whispered, "*Tell me.*"

Her hand went to his hair and smoothed it back with affection. "I'm thinking... things I don't understand."

"Why are you afraid, Sara?" he stepped closer, "You're shaking. I can see your heart beating through your clothes."

"I don't know."

"Don't fear me." He whispered, "I'll never hurt you again. A thousand muggles aren't worth losing you."

"I'm not afraid of you, Draco." Sara whispered as she drew near him, fighting alien desires she never knew she'd had.

Her eyes fell closed as she kissed him, letting her hand rest on the back of his neck just long enough for electric chills to race down his spine and butterflies to erupt in his stomach. He wanted to pull her closer until it was hard to breathe, kiss her the way that he had once on a bench in the snow, but there was no urgency, no now-or-never desperation, only love. She backed away after a lingering moment, letting his hand slip from hers.

"I have to get back now." She said and hurried from the terrace without saying goodnight.

Draco returned to the solarium, anxious and full of dread, convinced he'd done something wrong. Something *unforgivable*.

* * *

Harry found Draco sitting alone in the library, reading a book by firelight. It was late, everyone was asleep, and Draco's eyes were tired. He closed the book when he noticed Harry and set it aside.

"I thought you'd gone to bed." Draco admitted, "I was just waiting for Nikolae so he could let me in the room."

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"Why not run away?" Harry asked with sincerity, "I don't understand why you wait to see what I'll do to you."

"You *know* why, Potter. He's *afraid* of you. If I leave here I'll be a sitting duck." Draco explained, "I haven't been called in all this time. I don't think I *can* be."

"An effect of Dumbledore's wards, probably." Harry decided, "Malfoy, there's something I need to tell you."

"Why do I get the feeling that this is really bad and has to do with me?"

"Because perhaps you're a diviner as well. You're right. On both accounts."

Draco slumped against the back of the sofa and sighed. "Well then? Let's hear it."

"There is to be an attack on Voldemort this Friday night. The Death Eaters are having some sort of gathering, according to Sara, and there will be an opportunity we intend to take."

"But Sara's not well!"

"She won't be fighting, Malfoy. Dumbledore has assured me she will be perfectly safe here at the house."

"Go on."

"You have until Wednesday morning, day after next, but don't worry. You won't have to remain there long. Only a few days if all goes to plan, but if by some chance you are brought to the meeting you won't be harmed unless you curse one of ours."

Draco's face had gone deathly pale and there was terror in his eyes. "What do you mean? I won't have to remain *where*?"

Harry had taken a seat beside Malfoy and now put a shaky hand on Draco's shoulder. "You know what it's like to be left without a choice. I have no other option, Malfoy." Harry's voice grew quiet, as if it couldn't bear to say the words. "I'm sending you back to Voldemort."

Draco tried hard to maintain his composure, but it threatened to desert him completely. It had felt so good to be free again, to live without the agony of curses and threats, that the very thought of the catacombs was like a strong hand around his throat. He wanted to cry and didn't know how long he could refrain from throwing himself at Potter's feet and begging for mercy. "*Why are you doing this to me?*"

Harry looked Draco in the eye with all the conviction he could muster and said nothing for a long moment. He wanted to tell Draco everything, that it was all a trick, that Draco was a double agent, sent only to deliver false information, but of course he could do no such thing. Malfoy waited with fear in his eyes and it was strange to say the words, but Harry found they were the truth. Finally, he spoke.

"Because I trust you."

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32. All My Life

"All my life I've been disillusioned." Draco sighed. "I don't understand why Potter turned his back on me. I told him *everything*."

Nikolae sat on the edge of his sarcophagus and looked at Draco, who was climbing into a bed that had not been there earlier. "Would it help you to know that, with the exception of Severus, who refused to vote, Harry was the only one opposed? He complains the loudest when it comes to you, Draco, yet he defends you with the voice of a lion. In the end he acquiesced. Of course no one really *wanted* to do it. We all had our reservations and our prayers will be with you, but the fact is that Voldemort has vowed not to kill you. Your life is not in danger. We had to do what was best for the wizarding world."

"You?" Draco sat up. "You voted to send me back? And to think I actually liked you! Stop being nice to me if you hate me so much!" Draco threw himself down on the pillows and turned his back on the vampire. "And the same goes for Sara. You can just tell her that for me."

"She doesn't know. We feared it would upset her and she's in no condition to come to your rescue."

Nikolae explained, "Don't worry, Draco. We will get you out of this."

"Potter said it would only be a few days." Draco said, "How can you be so sure this plan will work? What if this so-called *opportunity* comes a moment too soon? What if you *lose*? Am I supposed to believe that everything will simply fall into place?"

"Sara saw it." Nikolae lied. Sara, he knew, had seen no such thing. This falsehood was meant only to protect Dumbledore's informants.

Draco was quiet for a long moment, so long that Nikolae assumed he was falling asleep and was about to leave him to it. Then he spoke. "I love her, you know."

"I know."

"I wish she'd never met Potter. I wish the night I met her that I'd been a different person. Had I been, everything would have turned out for the better. My life wouldn't be the cruel joke it's become. There would be no mark on my arm." Draco whispered, "I'd be *happy*."

"She loves you, Draco, but not the way you love her. Not the way she loves Harry."

"You can't convince me of that."

"Ah, but I have seen her soul and I know what's in her heart. You must let go of this desperation you feel or you will *never* be happy. If you do not, the thought of her will forever be a source of pain for you, a wound that will never close."

"If I could decide to stop being in love with Sara, don't you think I would have done it a long time ago? When she agreed to marry Potter? When she killed my father?"

"You need to understand that she will never return what you feel. You know it in your heart, yet you won't accept it. She holds you above all others, Draco. All except one. Nothing will change that."

Draco pulled the covers over his head, the vampire's words like a white-hot blade. His voice was small when he spoke and choked with emotion. "*Leave me alone*."

Nikolae sighed, having dealt the second of two harsh blows. He said nothing as he left the room, only hesitated in the doorway, wishing he could ease the boy's pain with wisdom and gentle words. He could not. Draco would have to deal with this knowledge in his own way.

* * *

Morning brought a new day and Draco waited patiently for Harry to come let him out of the room. (Nikolae, of course, was asleep in his sarcophagus.) In the torchlight he lay on the small bed that had been supplied to him, he assumed to ease his discomfort before they sent him off to certain torture. His head was surprisingly clear, even though he could not see the sun, and he decided to relish his last day of freedom. He would be in the catacombs before the next break of dawn.

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Draco hid the knowledge not a moment too soon as Sara came into his mind. She said nothing, but he felt her presence. Draco smiled.

Stop snooping around in my head.

I wasn't sure if you were awake.

Likely story. He grinned. How are you today?

Severus has me doped up on potions, but otherwise I feel pretty good. Better than yesterday.

Good. Where's Harry? I want out now.

He's still asleep. It's early yet. I'll come down.

No! You're supposed to stay in bed, Sara. I'll wait.

Suit yourself, but I was planning to sneak out to the courtyard for a little solitude. Are you sure you won't join me?

It's hardly solitude if you're not alone.

Says who? He heard the faint echo of her laughter. I'm coming down to let you out. After that we'll go from there.

* * *

Sara and Draco crept silently through the house to the courtyard, she held his arm and they laughed in the quiet without making a sound. It was so easy to fall back into the friendship they'd missed and both reflected on how nice it was to once again be in the other's company. Draco stopped at a copse of moonlight roses and pointed his wand. The bloom opened to full glory, then turned black and he picked it, handing it to Sara, who laughed out loud.

"They always turn black." He admitted with a shrug. "I don't know why."

"You don't?" She giggled, "Don't *all* evil sons produce black roses?"

"Very funny." Draco said with a grin as he took the flower from her hand and tossed it away. "Let's just forget about the *evil son* thing. I won't tell if you won't."

Still smiling, Sara agreed. "It's a deal. As long as you don't tell anyone I hate that horrible soup they keep giving me. I dump it in the plants when no one's looking."

"Shake?" Draco laughed, delighted by her presence and her good mood. Sara shook his hand. "There," he said, "now it's official." He put an arm around her, even though she was looking stronger today and led her along the path. Looking forward to some quality time as the house slept, they wandered through the trees to the fountain.

Christina stood at once, startled and awkward. It seemed she was always in the wrong place at the wrong time. A brief moment passed where no one quite knew what to say, and then Christina smiled at their attire. "Where exactly does one go to buy a cloak?"

"Eccentrics-R-Us." Sara laughed and pulled Draco along to take a seat across from Christina.

"I get mine at Dashing, Prince Valliant Types-R-Us."

"Of course you do." Christina's gaze lingered on Draco and, in Sara's opinion, she laughed a little too loud at Draco's jest.

Finally Christina glanced at the ground, then at Sara. "You're looking much better today." She said, "It's nice to see you up and about."

"Thank you, it's nice to *be* up and about."

With that all conversation stopped for a long, awkward moment. It seemed no one knew what to say next.

"So," Christina asked, "is everything all set for the wedding? Can I help with anything?"

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At the mention of the wedding, Sara and Draco unconsciously moved a little further apart on the bench they shared.

"Not everything." Sara sighed. "Harry's relatives aren't coming. I'm not quite sure what to do about it, but I have some ideas. Plus, Uncle Albus has decided that the guest list should be cut down to include only a few. He thinks it best that we invite everyone to the reception instead. Don't ask me why, but now I've got to send letters to about fifty people and it's so rude on such short notice, but I'll do what he asks. He always knows what's best and I never question his reasoning."

"I'd be glad to help write the letters." She offered.

"Thanks, but Hermione and Susan took over the task yesterday. I appreciate the offer, though."

"Well if you think of anything else."

Draco finally voiced a curiosity at last, mostly to get Sara off the hook. "Christina, what are you doing up so early?"

"I couldn't sleep." She smiled, knowing he would understand. "There's no traffic."

"I see."

She turned her gaze back to Sara. "I know this might sound rude and it's unintentional, but don't you have even *one* TV in this whole place?"

Sara laughed, unable to help it. "Harry has one, and he's none too happy about the fact that it doesn't work."

Christina's shoulders slumped.

"You're bored. Maybe Harry will take you out in his boat after breakfast?"

"Oh, I'm not bored, really!"

Sara simply smiled.

"Well, I thought I might go into town and look around later. Do you want to go, Draco?"

"I can't." He gave her an apologetic smile, "Go ahead without me."

In an effort to save Christina from her discomfort, Sara spoke up again. "Can you drive?"

"Yes."

"Then would you mind picking up dinner? There's a fish place that Harry loves. I could call in an order."

"Um, sure." She said and stood. "Just let me know when." She turned to Draco, "Maybe we could hang out for a little bit later? Since you're leaving so early tomorrow. You'll need to give me some instructions for the house if I'm to return there. See you at breakfast." She hurried away before he could respond.

Sara turned to Draco with a questioning. "Where are you going?" she asked, "And why wasn't I told?"

"I'm going, um... with Nikolae."

"Where?"

"I don't know." He lied.

* * *

Night came quickly. Sara was waiting rather impatiently for the last bit of sunlight to fall beneath the horizon and with a total lack of consideration for his privacy; she broke into Nikolae's mind. He was only just waking up and was unprepared to defend himself against such an invasion. Sara quickly found the information she sought, just as it was whisked away and the door shut.

Nikita, he said, you shouldn't have.

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How dare you lie to me! After all we've been through!

This was not my idea. You're not well. No one wanted to upset you.

HA! Sara shouted into his mind, So much for the trust we shared.

Don't say such things!

You've seen his memories! How could you vote to send him back! Nikolae! After what you've seen you should protect him with your life!

He was defending himself, but Sara didn't hear. She withdrew from him without warning and closed her mind to him.

"HARRY!" She bellowed as she pushed through room after room, with the injustice of it all raging through her. She called to him over and over again, her pace livid, her expression enraged. "HARRY POTTER!"

Finally, Harry hurried from the library into the lobby, where he met her with alarm and worry. He knew that she knew, there was no doubt in his mind and he stood with slumped shoulders to defend his decision to the one he loved.

"HOW COULD YOU!!" Sara screamed at Harry, "How could you *DO THIS* to him?!"

"I had no choice! It was the Order--"

"Did he tell you they *killed him*?" Sara shouted, her hands clenched, her knuckles white. "They *tortured* him until he *DIED*! And they brought him back only to do it again!" Crimson melted through her hair and Harry grew frightened. The red went beyond the streak this time and the floor gave a faint tremble. Sara's fury raged and it was clear she was losing control.

His voice was soft and nervous when he spoke. "Sara, you have to *calm down*."

"Why is *he* different? Is he less of a person? Would you send *RON* to such a fate?"

Harry lost his temper at the mention of Ron, his voice suddenly booming and loud. "You sound *just like him*! I never knew you were a *SLYTHERIN*!" He shouted, "He says that *all the time*! I shouldn't have to explain this to you, Sara, but *RON* is *NOT* Draco *MALFOY*!"

"I can't believe you! What happened to the person I fell in love with? You're *despicable*! He *TRUSTS YOU*, Harry!" she yelled, "And *SO DID I*!" Her composure suddenly shattered, she broke down in helpless sobs and collapsed to the floor, where she sat in the pool of a silken cloak and cried into her hands. The tremors stopped. Thunder rolled across the sky and the winds rattled the trees outside. Lightning lit the windows, splitting the night sky as it opened its clouds on the world. The rain was fast and hard, pelting the windows like a spray of pebbles. Harry's anger fell to shreds.

"I'm sorry, Sara." He said, "But I have no choice."

He left her there, hoping her storm would tear the house to pieces.

* * *

Draco stood in the shadows until he thought Harry had gone. The storm had diminished, though only a little and it was painful to hear the way she cried over his demise. As he crossed the room on quiet feet he thought; *Nikolae is wrong*.

"Sara." He whispered as he knelt beside her and stroked her hair. She looked up at him without wiping her eyes and the misery he saw in them tore at his heart.

"*I won't let him!*" She said as she choked back a flood of emotion at the sight of Draco. "No one will harm you again, I *swear* it!"

Draco threw his arms around her and she clung to him, crying softly into his shoulder. He held her close and with fierce emotion. "I'll be ok, Sara." He told her, his voice soft and reassuring. "It's only for a few days."

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Sara said nothing, only tightened her arms around him.

"Besides," he added, "you shouldn't worry so much about me. I think Harry's getting a little upset."

"I don't care!" she sniffled and pulled away, "I knew he'd changed while I was gone, but I never thought he'd lose his integrity. I don't even know him anymore." She wiped her eyes with his handkerchief. "They'll hurt you again, we all know they will! What if you don't come back this time? What if Voldemort changes his mind about killing you? Did Harry think of *that*? I *hate* him for this, Draco."

"Don't," he told her, "It wasn't his doing." Draco had no idea why he was sticking up for Potter except it seemed like the right thing to do. "Sara, you're getting married in four days. You *don't* hate him."

"You're right, I don't, but I can't even *describe* the anger I feel. I don't want anything to happen to you." She caught his eyes and held his gaze. "You've been through enough already."

"*Why* did you kiss me?" He asked, his expression both pained and hopeful. "Last night, on the terrace."

Sara was hesitant as she considered the question. "I don't know." She answered with honesty. "I can't stop thinking about you." She laid a shaky hand against his face and his eyes fell closed at her touch.

"Do you love me at all? Not as a friend, Sara. You know how I mean. I need to know before I leave here. I need to know now."

Sara hesitated a long moment, her inner struggle apparent, and then she answered. "Yes." She whispered, "I never knew it until I thought I might lose you forever, but I *do* love you, Draco. As more than just a friend. I can't explain it, it's so *confusing*, but I can't deny it, either."

* * *

Christina had been looking *everywhere* for Draco. While this house wasn't as big as his, it was still easy to lose someone, though he was usually rather easy to find. It was mostly boredom which drove her to seek him out, as they had no standing plans. She simply missed his company and wanted to spend some time with him before he left in the early morning hours.

Christina was troubled to know that she was developing feelings for Draco. It could only lead to heartbreak and disappointment, she thought, and it was foolish to entertain such feelings. He was old money, refined, distinguished, and had impeccable taste. She was a poor, homeless, disillusioned dreamer who had stupid ideas of acting and stardom, begging for half-eaten food on the streets of

London. She was the dirt beneath his shoes, though she never got this vibe from him. In Draco's presence Christina felt like an equal, and sometimes the way he looked at her made her think that maybe he liked her, too.

The power went out, no doubt due to the sudden storm, leaving the house in the dimness of firelight. Rain splattered the floor, swept in by a tapering wind. Christina closed the back doors and then continued on her quest for Draco; only it was Harry she came across. He sat alone in a chair; shoulders slumped, looking forlorn and lost in thought. The sadness and misery in his demeanor made her pause in the doorway, but after a moment's hesitation, she went in.

He sat before the fire in a dark room next to the terrace. There was a bottle of liquor open on the table before him from which he had not poured and an empty glass that he had yet to touch, as if drinking was an idea he had abandoned. He only stared at it and Christina took a nervous seat beside him. He didn't move. Didn't look to see who it was. Christina said nothing, only took the bottle and re-capped it. He stared at it as he'd done before and the pain in his eyes was nearly unbearable to look upon.

"I'm wrong." He finally said. His voice was strained and quiet and Christina listened. "She's right, you know. I could be sending him to his death. This decision never should have been mine to make."

Harry's eyes finally left the glass and his head fell into his hands. Christina put her arms around him and pulled him against her shoulder. It was inappropriate, she knew, but he was in need of a friend. She smoothed his hair and he wrapped his arms around her, holding tight to the comfort she provided. His heart was torn apart, she knew. It couldn't be more obvious. Harry was sending Draco to an uncertain fate, but the fact remained, from his own admission, he had no other choice.

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"You're a good person, Harry. I know you are. It radiates from you." Christina whispered, "I know you'll do the right thing." Having not heard the argument, only muffled yelling from a far off room, she wasn't sure what he meant, though obviously Sara was upset with him and it had to do with Draco's leaving.

"Don't be so certain." He managed and Christina realized he was trying not to cry. He pulled away and tried to smile. "Don't think badly of Sara. She's probably the only person alive who loves him. And she's right to be angry with me."

* * *

Draco tried to sleep, but it was useless. His fear kept his heart pounding and his imagination alive. He couldn't even *fathom* the wrath he would meet in the catacombs.

He was lonely, but thankful for his solitude. Nikolae had gone off to Manchester to hunt and the rest of the house was sound asleep, awaiting the dark hour when Nikolae returned to take him away.

His thoughts turned to Sara. He imagined her in the darkness, dreaming of better days. He wished he could say something to ease her mind, but he was at a loss for words. He loved her, so much it could drive him to madness, but what was happening between them wasn't right. No matter what she said to him, no matter what manner of emotion he felt in her embrace, Nikolae had been right on one account. She *did* love him above all others - all except one. Sara belonged with Harry and even if he somehow managed to prevent the wedding and steal her away, she would always love him more.

The door was slow to open, and then the usual hooded figure came into the room amid an aura of firelight from the outside. There was only one candle to see by, but Draco left it unlit, even though the door was closed again and all light lost to the dark.

"Is it that late already?" He asked.

"It's me."

"Sara!" he said and sat up, surprised. "Potter would *kill* me if he caught us down here alone together."

"I had to see you." She said and sat on the edge of the bed, "Draco, I can't talk him out of it. He just keeps saying he has no choice."

"I don't believe that he does."

"Get dressed. I'll help you get out of here. I can use the wind to take you so far away they'll never find you. *Voldemort* could never find you. You'll be alone, Draco, but you'll be safe from harm."

"I can't run away."

"Of course you can! What other option do you have?"

"I'll do as they ask, Sara. I'll be their martyr."

"Why?" she asked, her voice small and confused, "Why would you submit to such a thing?"

"Because," he explained, "all my life I've been weak, hiding behind my father, and later cowering in Potter's shadow, hoping someone would come along and save me. I'm nothing, Sara. Just an evil son without direction, conviction, or integrity. Harry told me once that heroism is defined by one's actions, that anyone can be one. Well, this is the opportunity I've been given. I could cry and beg to be spared, but I won't. It's obvious to me that my going back to the catacombs is part of some strategy. If it means freedom for us all, then I'll scrape together what little courage I have and do my part. I won't back down for once in my life. Sara, I want you to be proud of me. Even if I end up dead."

Sara found his shoulder in the dark and rested her head against it. With arms entwined he held her close, knowing he meant what he'd said, wishing things could be different.

"Draco," she whispered, "I'm in love with you and I don't understand it. I don't know where it came from. I've only just realized it these past few days. I've always loved you, of course, but never this way. The thing is I don't love Harry any less."

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"Maybe you're just afraid," he offered, "Getting married is a big step. Plus, you almost died twice this week. As for me? Think about it, Sara. We waited a long time to see each other again and there are

worlds between us. What's on my arm draws you to me whether you know it or not."

"I hope you're right." She sighed as they lay back on the single pillow, "But if you're wrong then how can I let you leave? Draco, I'll be married the next time I see you. If I do see you again, that is."

"Don't think that way." He said and kissed her hair, "Potter's a man of his word. If he sends me back, vowing it's only for a few days, then you can bet your life he'll get me out."

Sara hesitated. "This is the last time we can ever be this way. Alone in the dark and free to do as we please."

"It is, Sara, and as hard as it is for me to say this, you don't belong here. You don't belong with me." His arms tightened around her, "Stay with me awhile." He whispered. "Then go back to Harry. You will always be my closest friend, Mrs. Potter."

* * *

"It's working exactly as planned!" Voldemort said as a sly smile crept across his face. "Alone in the dark and sharing a bed. I couldn't ask for better results!"

"Yes." Wormtail agreed as they watched the images surface in the reddish-black swirl. "Brilliant, Master!"

"It's only a matter of time until Potter finds out."

"Yes." Wormtail chuckled, wringing his hands, "If we could only wake him and lead him to where they are... the wedding would be off *tonight*."

"Give it time." Voldemort said.

"I only wish we could hear their words."

"Who needs words when the Elemental's heart obviously divides? Soon Harry Potter will be a part of her past. *Very* soon." Voldemort said as the sinister smile spread. "Nothing would bring me greater joy."

* * *

Nikolae let himself in and, even though there was no light, he knew Draco was not alone. Her perfume filled the room. "Nikita," he said, "we need to talk."

"It's early yet." she whispered, snuggled close to Draco, whose arms were around her. "You can't mean to take him already."

"Not yet."

"Go, Sara." Draco kissed her forehead, "I'll see you before I leave."

Sara wanted to cling to him, never let him go, but only kissed his cheek and rose from the bed. The stone floor was cold under her bare feet and she made a mental note to get a rug. She followed Nikolae out, leaving the door open. Draco didn't mind. He no longer feared being captured by Voldemort. It was cold in the cave, not that Nikolae noticed, but Sara pulled her cloak around her as they climbed into Harry's boat. Facing each other with solemn expressions, the little vessel drifted to the far side of the cavern.

"It's so beautiful in here." The vampire said, looking around at the intricate detail of the stone trees in the light of the torches and the pale glowing water that lapped at their trunks. "Harry did a fine job."

"It's late." Sara said, her anger at his breach of trust tingeing her soft-spoken words. "Much too late for small talk and boat rides. Why are we here?"

"What were you doing in there, Nikita?"

"Comforting my friend." she defended, "Comforting myself."

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"You have not *been* yourself."

Sara gave him a look of mild outrage. "Draco is in danger and everyone I trusted is in on it. *You're* in on it."

"But you've only known for a matter of hours. Besides, you're a diviner. You know he'll be alright."

"I know no such thing! I can't see any of it."

"That's troubling, but I put my faith in the Order of the Phoenix. I believe in the wisdom of Albus Dumbledore. We will protect him to the best of our ability. I can give you no promises other than that."

Yes, Draco is in danger, but it must be done."

Sara sighed with impatience.

"Your thoughts toward him have changed. Tell me about it. Put your anger away for now and allow me to be your friend. I am worried about you."

"I should be the least of your concerns."

"You will never be *that*." Nikolae sighed, "I can read it from your mind, of course, but I won't. I'd prefer to hear it from you."

"I don't want to discuss my feelings for Draco!"

The vampire looked her in the eye. "Does Harry know?"

"No." Sara gave a heavy sigh, "I don't think so."

"Didn't you swear to never hide anything from him again? Or does that apply only to *everything else*?"

Shame crept into Sara's eyes. "It all started with a dream. I was in Keltse-tia, at Vanya's house, and Draco saved me from a giant red symbol of discontent. I don't recall what it was; only what it meant and that it was chasing me. When I awoke Harry was there and the feeling faded, but as soon as I went back to sleep I dreamed of Draco again and it seems I can't stop! When I awoke to find Uncle Albus in my room after the attack on Christina and me, that's when I felt it most acutely. It was like an ache inside of me. Like I'd taken a potion that wouldn't wear off. I couldn't get him off my mind."

"You felt as though you were in love with him?"

"I still do." Sara glanced at her nervous hands and then back at the vampire. "But it doesn't affect the

way I feel about Harry. That remains unchanged. It's so strange. I've never felt this way about Draco before. *Never.*"

Nikolae took her hand in a gesture of comfort, but then something caught his eye. Realization dawned in his expression and the boat made a swift path for the landing, leaving a rippling wake in the calm waters. "We will speak again later." He said as he helped Sara from the boat, there is something I have to do and it shouldn't wait." He made to hurry away and then turned back in afterthought. "In the meantime, Nikita, stay away from Draco."

* * *

The candle was lit when Sara returned and Draco sat on the edge of the bed, nervous. He stood and tried to smile.

She trembled as she searched for the right words, knowing there were none. "I've come to say goodbye." she told him.

"I feared as much." Draco tried again to smile, "I knew someday I'd have to say goodbye to you. I hoped it wouldn't be so soon."

"You're coming back, remember? Don't make it sound so final."

Draco sighed and said nothing.

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"I guess I should hug you now. I don't want to be there when he takes you." Sara crossed the small room and threw her arms around him, managing to hold back a flood of tears at the thought of never seeing him again.

"You're right." He said as he held her close, "I shouldn't say such things."

Sara pulled away just enough to look him in the eye. "I *will* see you again, even if I have to find you myself."

Draco kissed her cheek. "You'll do no such thing."

Her hand slipped behind his neck, sending the electricity of her touch trickling down his spine. She kissed him in a sudden impassioned moment and all the emotion he vowed to suppress came forth in an uncontrollable flood. He remembered the madness of such rapture, he'd felt it once before, and the unbearable low which had followed. After the Yule Ball, enduring the sight of her hand in hand with Potter had been excruciating. Draco pushed her away.

"*STOP IT!*" he shouted and Sara took a surprised step back. "Stop *DOING THIS* to me!"

"I'm sorry." She whispered.

"Don't you *realize* how *HORRIBLE* you are? Stop *playing* with my heart like it's *NOTHING!*"

"I didn't mean to-"

"You *know* what you're doing!!" he seethed, "You have *no* intensions of leaving Potter, yet you *still* do this to me!" He paced the floor, and then looked to her once more. "It *kills* me, you know. *Every time* you touch me I get my hopes up and it's just a *game* to you! Then I have to watch you be with *someone else!! I CAN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE!*"

She touched his shoulder, wanting to apologize, wanting to explain, but he pushed it away.

"Don't *TOUCH ME!*" he yelled at her. "Don't you *get it?* It's all or *nothing!* Be with me forever or *back off!!*"

Sara was trying hard not to cry. "Draco, don't-"

"*Chose*, Sara. *Chose now!*" He demanded, "Are you going to marry Potter or not?"

"Yes."

"Then never do this again." He said and turned his back on her, his voice low and emotional. "We will always be friends, like I said, but I never want to feel this way again. I'm *done* being hurt by you. It ends here and now. Go back to bed, Sara."

With tears in her eyes and too much to say, Sara ran from the room. The tears came as she hurried up the steps and were uncontrollable by the time she collapsed onto the sofa in the library. There was a bottle of rum on the table and Sara's gaze fell upon it.

* * *

"Severus, have you had any luck?"

Snape rubbed his eyes and blinked at the vampire. "I don't know if I'd call it that." He replied. Snape slammed the book he was reading shut. A cloud of dust puffed from its frail old pages and he set it aside. "I've simply made a list of remote possibilities." He indicated a scroll that spanned the table and held lots of small print.

"Something came to my attention tonight that may change that."

"Please elaborate. I need all the help I can get."

"It was a small scar on Sara's wrist." Nikolae explained, "Albus and I took note of it when we brought her to St. Mungo's and it was a fresh wound then. We dismissed it at the time, but I believe Voldemort may have taken Sara's blood."

"So you want me to focus on blood brews? That *does* narrow it down."

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"Tell me; is there such a thing as a real love potion?"

"Sort of. Not the kind muggles write about in their books. There are a few, but all of them require a certain feeling of love to already exist. Most are weak and require personal artifacts. Another uses fingernails. I believe there is only one which requires blood." Snape explained, tired and somewhat bored. "Why do you ask?"

"You must keep this between us."

"Of course."

"Sara has confessed that she is quite suddenly and inexplicably in love with Draco. She has constant dreams about him. She can't stop thinking about him."

Snape's eyes widened with understanding and he set to searching through the piles of books before him as Nikolae looked on, relating his theory as Snape flipped through pages.

* * *

"I had a feeling I'd find you here." Draco said as he wandered into the center of the courtyard. Water tinkled like chimes from Frodo's base and into the pool below. The benches were cold this late at night, but Christina had covered the one she rested on with a thick cotton blanket. She sat up and gestured for Draco to sit beside her.

"I was hoping to see you before you left." She said, "I was afraid you would forget about me with all that's going on."

"Forget about you? Are you mad?" Draco tried to smile and succeeded.

"I waited most of the evening, but it never seemed to be a good time. I just wanted to talk to you."

"I've wanted to talk to you, too."

"Draco, I like the people here, but I don't know where I fit in. Sara is sick, they're in the middle of arranging a wedding and I'm in their way. I don't own a cloak or a fancy stick and I feel like I've stepped into another world. Why can't I leave? I've only stayed this long because *you're* here. Now that you're leaving, well, I wish I could go with you."

"No you don't. Trust me when I say you're safest wherever Harry is. Stay here for a few more days. Sara is feeling better. She still needs rest, but she's good company. I can't say as much for *Potter*, he's as dull as a paper knife, but they'll look out for you. Christina, I'm sorry you got dragged into this."

"It's not your fault." She laid her hand on his. "What happens after a few days?"

"I'm not sure. To be honest I don't know if we'll ever see each other again." He paused and took a deep breath. "I have made arrangements for you to stay at my house as soon as Potter thinks it's safe for you to return there. If I get out of this alive I hope you'll be around."

Christina smiled, but Draco saw that her eyes had misted over. He didn't understand why he was so touched by this. He usually made a sport of making girls cry, especially muggles, but this one was different for some reason. Until now Sara was the only person who had ever affected him this way. *Don't do that*, he thought, *I'm not who you think I am*. His hand found her lustrous chestnut hair and, realizing what he was doing, he pulled it away and let it drop to his side.

Her eyes filled with disappointment and in a fleeting moment she hid the emotion. "I don't want anything to happen to you." She told him, "I'd hate to sound melodramatic, but I don't want to lose you so soon. I like you, Draco." Suddenly uncomfortable, she straightened her jumper. "As a friend, I mean."

He gave her an uncomplicated smile. "I'll see you again." he said, "And when I do I'll buy you cloak and a million pairs of socks and I'll get us a big pizza and you can have *all* the crust. Well," he shrugged, "all except *mine*."

Christina laughed and longed to hug him. She would miss him every moment he was away, but didn't know how to say it.

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Nikolae's voice came into his head, telling him it was time. "Christina," he said, "I have to go now."

He stood and so did she.

"I'll be around." She promised, "I hope you will be, too."

"I'll do my best."

She nervously let her hand rest on his shoulder for a brief moment. "Be careful."

Draco took the hand that touched him. "Would it offend you if I asked you to hug me?" he asked, trembling with fear and nerves, "I'm going to miss you. You're the only sane person I know."

Her answer was to step closer and put her arms around him. He held her that way for a long moment, and then he kissed her cheek, smiled, and walked away. "I'll see you soon." He said, and disappeared into the lilacs.

* * *

"Snape wanted to come, but he was upset. He wouldn't even talk to me." Harry explained, "He sent this for you." He handed Draco a small vial. "It will repel the effects of any other potion for 48 hours." Draco swallowed its contents and handed back the empty vial, which disappeared into Harry's pocket. "Also, Dumbledore asks that you swallow this. He told me not to tell you what it is, but it won't hurt you. You can be sure of that."

Draco swallowed the tiny item without argument.

"Hermione sends you this ring." Harry handed it over. "She said it should be worn on a toe to avoid detection and it will dull any pain you feel."

Draco took off his shoe and sock. "Leave it to Granger to send me a *toe* ring."

"She didn't have to send you *anything*. It was rather thoughtful if you ask me, especially after the way you've treated her."

"Calm down Potter." Draco grinned, "I suppose I could refrain from calling her a filthy mudblood for a few days. After that I can't say." Draco straightened up; his shoe retied, and looked to Harry.

"Malfoy? Why are you going along with this? Throw a fit, scream, cry, do *anything* and I won't make you go."

"I'm doing this because you asked me to." Draco explained, "I need to make up for cursing Sara. I need to prove to you that I'm worthy of respect. I need to change the meaning of the name 'Malfoy'. I don't want to be a coward anymore, Potter. I want to deserve the friends I have."

Harry gave him a pained smile.

"There's something going on. I'm not blind to the fact and for all the trouble I've caused, I can make up for it by doing my part. Unfortunately for me, my part is going back to Voldemort." He withdrew a small scroll and gave it to Harry. "If I don't come out of this, Potter, I ask you to look out for Christina. That's my will. It leaves everything to her except two things. Make sure Sara receives the family jewelry from our vault at Gringott's." he hesitated, "Malfoy Manor I left to you."

Harry was speechless.

"There's enough Dark Arts stuff in there to keep you busy for years. Don't look at me like that Potter; it's just a house after all."

"Thank you." Harry managed and put the scroll in his pocket. "But we'll see each other again, Malfoy. Tomorrow perhaps. Saturday at the latest."

"But that's the wedding!"

"Don't worry. You'll be out in time for the party." Harry smiled, even though his stomach was in knots. He had the worst feeling and did his best to hide his fear. "Now it's time for you to go. It will be dawn in only a few hours."

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"Come Draco." Nikolae said. "We head for London."

Draco looked to Harry for a long moment, wanting to say so many things, but nothing seemed right. "I hate you, you know." He smiled with a warmth Harry had never seen before.

"Sure you do." Harry smiled and for the second time had the desperate desire to hug Draco Malfoy and didn't. "Be careful. Keep your offensive personality in check or we might find you in pieces."

"Right. Shove off then, Potter."

"Send me a postcard."

Draco followed Nikolae out and glanced one last time over his shoulder. He smiled and Harry smiled back, then he was gone. Harry felt numb. He had the feeling he would never see Malfoy again.

* * *

"Why here?" Draco asked as he stood in his London home.

Nikolae gave the rehearsed information. "The others were concerned that there might be a way for Voldemort to track where you came from. Not much is known about the Dark Mark and some belief it has attributes similar to that of a port-key. It's best that he not know where Harry lives. Sara will be alone there tomorrow after all."

"True." Draco agreed. "Well, let's get this over with. We don't want you out of your coffin after sunrise." He drew his wand and raised his sleeve. "*Morsmordre!*"

"Good luck to you." Nikolae said and stepped away, "My prayers are with you."

"I need more than prayers." Draco sighed, shaking with fear, "Whatever you do, don't forget to give Sara my message. I left her in anger."

"I won't forget."

Draco smiled at the vampire and disappeared.

"You!" Voldemort rose from his chair. "*What are you doing here?!*"

"This is my punishment for cursing Sara." Draco explained, his hands clasped elegantly in front, still holding his wand and his stance betraying nothing. "Did you really think such an act would go unpunished? They didn't want me of course and felt sending me back to you was far worse than Azkaban."

"Return there immediately!"

"I can't. They took me to my house so if I leave that's where I'll end up. They said the Mark is like a port-key. If I knock at the door they won't take me in."

"This won't do!" Voldemort paced the floor, his frustration and anger apparent. "The potion can't accomplish *anything* this way."

"What potion?" Draco thought a moment, and then it dawned on him. "It was you! You made Sara think she loved me! Well it worked," he smirked, "but she's still marrying Potter."

Voldemort raised his wand and spoke the Veritas Curse. "Why did they send you here?"

Draco had forgotten about this curse that only Voldemort knew and seemed able to accomplish. Had it been the more common serum, Snape's potion would have allowed him to lie. He nearly panicked, but felt the truth coming out of his mouth whether he liked it or not. "Because they're planning something and they didn't want me around."

"What is their plan?"

"I don't know exactly. They said Sara saw it in the Orb of Arassel. An opportunity during some meeting you're having tomorrow night. They are planning to attack."

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"You should have killed her while you had the chance." Voldemort seethed, "You could have done it a thousand ways and you picked the one that didn't work. Your incompetence is unacceptable."

"She won't be involved." Draco said, desperate to keep this knowledge hidden, but unable to stop it.

"She's ill. She's staying home. The others are leaving from Hogwarts."

Voldemort's composure returned and something akin to an evil grin lit his eyes. "Where do they live?"

"Princeton Heights, on the Channel. About a mile north of the Golden Fish."

"Excellent."

"Who is involved? How many?"

"I don't know their number. I only know of Potter and Dumbledore, the vampire Nikolae, Weasel and Granger, a few others from school. Snape I imagine and some of the teachers. I'm not sure. They only

refer to their group as 'the Order'."

"And what is your part to play? Are you to sabotage from the inside? Create a diversion?"

"I was told only that I wouldn't be harmed unless I cursed one of theirs. I have no other purpose here." Voldemort snickered and it was a frightening sound that made the hairs on Draco's neck stand up.

"You have one now." He raised his wand again, "*Finite Veritas*."

* * *

When Sara woke the first thing she saw was that Harry was not in bed. His side was unmussed, his pillow fresh and fluffed. The second thing she saw caught her breath in her throat and she sat up. The rose was black as pitch and a folded note accompanied it. It could only be from Draco as she remembered their morning together in the courtyard and his words to her. "*They always turn black. I don't know why.*"

"Oh Draco." She said, her eyes squeezed shut against the knowledge that he was gone. "You're no evil son."

She unfolded the short note and tears misted her eyes before she read a word of it.

Sara,

Please forgive me for being angry. It's not you're fault. You will always be my closest friend. There is nothing I wouldn't do for you and what I did actually was for you. Potter is who makes you happy. I couldn't let you jeopardize everything you have out of some mistaken emotion for me. I love you, Sara. I only want what's best for you.

In my mind, I set you apart.

Love, Draco

Sara held the letter against her chest, as if his words could reach through to sooth her heart. She tried to push her mind into his, but he was lost to her. Wherever he was, there was nothing but darkness. Sara dressed quickly and scribbled a note for Harry. She would find him when she returned, but the ache she felt needed an answer. She had to know if what she was doing was wrong.

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Though she was still weakened from her illness, Sara leapt off the top of the little tower in which she slept and use the wind to take her to the cottage next door. Once inside, she opened her little gold box, identical to the one Harry carried and found herself in the Hogwarts tower she had once called home. She hadn't been here in weeks and, although nothing had changed, it all looked so strange to her. Like a dream or an unexpected memory from long ago. She wanted to stay awhile, linger in these rooms as she once had, but her visit had a purpose and she made her way to the door. There were still a few old brooms propped against the wall and Sara took one, thankful she wouldn't have to descend the endless spiral of steps. She knew she would never make it.

Even though it was strictly forbidden, Sara guided the broom through the halls of the school until she came to the Headmaster's office.

"Ice mice." She said and waited while the entrance opened. Just inside she left the broom and climbed the short flight to the inner door. "Uncle Albus?" She called, "Are you here?"

"He's here, dear." One of the portraits informed her, "He's on his way in."

"Thank you." She said and collapsed into a chair without waiting to be asked.

"Sara!" Dumbledore said as he entered the room, "I'm rather surprised to see you. I believe you were put on strict bed rest!"

"You know me better than that." She sighed, "I can't stay in bed when my world is in turmoil."

"Yes, Harry told me you'd learned of our decision regarding Mr. Malfoy."

"Actually, what I'm here for has nothing to do with that."

"Oh? Then tell me, what troubles you?"

"I..." she hesitated, "I know how you feel about it, but I want to look in the Mirror of Erised."

"I am afraid, Sara, that any problems you have cannot be resolved by looking in the mirror. It can't make your choices for you. Such answers can only be found by means of inflection."

"But I *don't know*! And I only have a little time. Uncle. Let me look just this once and I'll never ask you again."

Dumbledore sighed. "I think I may know the nature of your distress. I believe I should get Severus. Perhaps he can explain some things to you. Wait here. I will return shortly."

Dumbledore left the room and Sara gave a heavy sigh, falling against the back of her chair, frustrated and defeated.

Her eyes wandered the most interesting room in the wizarding world, wishing there was even a single item among her uncle's many possessions which could provide her with answers. But then again, there was one, and she took it down off its shelf. She had never worn the Sorting Hat. Her house had been chosen by her uncle, unlike anyone else at Hogwarts, yet the Sorting Hat could look deep into her nature and had no reason to lie or mislead her. With only a moment's hesitation, she put it on.

"Hmmm...." it whispered, "*Complex. Difficult to be sure.*"

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*A Ravenclaw you might be, intelligent and clever,
but Hufflepuff suits you as well.*

*Kind, friendly and generous you be,
yet Gryffindor is your desire I see.*

*Brave and true when necessity calls,
but behind closed doors, into deceit you do fall.*

*The heart of a Slytherin also holds thee,
You're selfish and stubborn and long to be free.*

*Banded together you still stand alone.
When faced with decision you turn and run.
What house suits you best when you fit in all four?
Could it be Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff or Gryffindor?
One your heart covets, but against fate you can't win!
You belong in Slytherin."*

Sara tore it from her head, leapt from her chair and slammed the hat to the floor. "NOOOO!!" she screamed, "You *LIAR! I'M NO SLYTHERIN!*" Sara burst into tears as she stomped on the hat, which bellowed in protest and the portraits cried out for her to cease and desist!

The severe looking woman who had greeted her now held her hands to her face in horror. "The Hat has spoken! You can't disagree!"

An old man shouted at her. "You'll ruin it! Stop acting like a child! You heard what it said!"

Others talked among themselves. "She certainly *acts* like a Slytherin."

"Dumbledore will be most displeased!"

"I can't believe she's a relative of *his!*"

"Some apples fall far from the tree."

Several nodded in agreement.

Her face streaming with tears, Sara ran from the room, sobbing out loud and pushed past Snape and Dumbledore, who were just running up the steps at the sound of her shouting and the excited chatter from the paintings. They tried to stop her, but Sara threw herself over the broom and fled.

* * *

She found him in the library, wrapped in a blanket before the fire. He was awake, though he looked like death. "Harry," she said, "I can't marry you."

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33. Mending Bridges

Harry blinked and sat up. He said nothing for a long moment, just stared at her tear-stained face. Then he burst out laughing. He laughed out loud, so hard and for so long that Sara was taken off guard.

"What?" she asked, "Why are you laughing? I hardly think it's funny!"

"But it is funny!" Harry stood to address her with a manic sort of anger beneath his words and Sara backed up a step. "I was just thinking that I couldn't *possibly* feel any worse."

"Well I hardly think *laughing* is appropriate!"

Harry's anger soared beyond his control and he yelled at her. "WHAT DO YOU *EXPECT* ME TO DO?" he shouted, "I've cried over you until there was nothing left! I can't *take this* anymore! What is it *this* time? Need more time alone? Is it because the ORDER voted to send Malfoy back? You don't like the house? The timing is bad? You broke a nail? There's no *pleasing* you, Sara!"

Her voice was small when she spoke. "I'm a Slytherin."

"What?" Harry laughed, this time with amusement as his anger receded. "Sara, I wasn't serious about that! Just because you *look* like Malfoy doesn't mean."

"THIS IS SERIOUS!" She shouted, the tears streaking her face again, hanging on the edge of control.

"I put on the sorting hat. It put me in Slytherin! This isn't a joke, Harry. What I should have said is that *you* can't marry *me*."

"The hat tried to put *me* in Slytherin, too! It doesn't mean anything! I think I know you better than the Sorting Hat!" He could see how serious she was and Harry grew distraught. "Ok, you're a Slytherin! I don't care! You're going to marry me whether you like it or not!"

Sara's face filled with guilt and her eyes found the floor. "You haven't heard everything, Harry. There's more. And it's worse."

Harry's heart sank into the pit of his stomach. "It's Malfoy, isn't it? *Please* tell me it's not Malfoy."

Her voice could barely be heard as a light rain began to fall outside. "I'm in love with him." Her breath hitched, "I just realized it the other day. I've never had feelings for him, but all of a sudden... I know how it must feel to hear this, but I can't marry you if I haven't been honest."

"We're getting married *TOMORROW!*" Harry shouted, overcome by a sudden burst of fury, "I *hate* you for this! I've done nothing but love you since the day we met and all you do is *LIE* to me and *BREAK MY HEART!*"

Sara burst into fresh tears. "I'm so sorry Harry! I don't understand it! I still love you, I've never stopped!"

"Save it for someone who cares, Sara, because I can't do it anymore." He said, knowing he didn't mean what he said. He still cared, but anger clouded his reason. "You're right. I can't marry you. The wedding is off."

Harry stormed out of the room, leaving her to collapse onto his place on the sofa, wishing she had fallen off the ledge that night in the hotel room. Wishing Nikolae hadn't saved her. Coming home had been a terrible mistake.

* * *

Draco grinned and waved at the Dark Lord from his perch at the end of yet another steel table. He was naked except for his shorts and socks. Voldemort ignored him and turned to one of the two examiners.

"You found nothing?"

"Correct, sir. He is not transmitting any signals and has no concealed weapons."

"Lucky for him." Voldemort sneered and approached Draco, who had taken to gently swinging his dangling legs as if enjoying himself. "What do you have to say, Malfoy?"

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"Pleasant day for a strip search. You should try it sometime, it's *invigorating*."

The examiner appeared at Voldemort's side. "You will remember to show respect to your master or you will *be* reminded."

"I'll remember that if I ever decide to appoint one."

Voldemort gave a sinister chuckle and motioned to the assistant, who Draco thought of as The Tickler. He brought over a rather wicked potion that Draco remembered well. "We gave him the strongest Skellitis we had, but it seemed to have no effect." The man explained, "It was certainly in order. He kept giggling and making obscene remarks as we examined him."

"What do you have there?"

"Atropium. It makes the muscles cramp most painfully." Something lurked in The Tickler's eyes at the thought. A sort of sick, twisted excitement.

"Give him a double dose."

Draco took the potion and drank it down, smiled, and tossed the cup back. "Next round's on me, but get mine with a twist of lemon. Bad aftertaste."

Voldemort regarded him with suspicion. "You've been given a Repellius Potion!"

"Sometimes it pays to be the Potion Master's favorite student." Draco said, his smile fading as anger crept into his words. "I told them *everything*. They know what you did to me. They also know about that hospital and Dumbledore acted with the Ministry to blame an imaginary muggle terrorist group for your deeds. Potter is in no danger, just so you know. You've accomplished nothing."

"You stand corrected, Draco." Voldemort grinned, "He is in plenty of danger."

"Well, if you ask Harry, he'll tell you that *danger* is his middle name." Draco smirked.

"You won't be smiling for long."

"How do you figure? Are you going to cast the dreaded frowning spell?" Draco shivered with mock terror. "Oh no! Not the dreaded frowning spell!"

"You return to me with a false sense of security. Do you expect a rescue?" Voldemort chuckled, amused, "Don't get too comfortable with that idea. They'll never make it past the traps."

"Actually, it's because I think you're a total nutcase. Have you ever listened to yourself? *Kill the muggles, rule the world, let's all hold hands and be evil*. I mean really! Here you are this supposedly great and powerful wizard who lives underground with a bunch of weirdoes, plotting against ordinary people and getting your ass kicked time and time again by a little kid. Is Harry Potter all that? Or are you just not all that clever? Think about that. Brood on it for awhile if you would."

"I do believe you're familiar with the Crucio spell."

"Do whatever you're gonna do, Tommy boy, because I'll never be your pawn again."

The Tickler stepped forward and punched Draco in the mouth. Blood seeped from his split lip, but the pain was little compared to what he'd expected. Granger's toe ring was suddenly his most treasured belonging. He wiped the blood away and laughed out loud.

Voldemort appeared bewildered by Draco's lack of fear. "You'll be thinking a little differently soon."

"How do you figure? Because you think you can scare me into submission again?"

"Because our meeting has been postponed. When they attack they'll be walking into an ambush and I'll be surprised if even one survives. Tonight we kill the Elemental." Now it was Voldemort's turn to smile. "Speaking of opportunities! Weak and unguarded! How foolish they are."

Draco's eyes filled with dread. "*No!*" he whispered.

"If they think a Repellius potion can keep the truth from *me* then they are mistaken."

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"Why can't you just leave her alone?" Draco yelled, furious, mostly at himself for not trying harder to suppress the information. "What has she ever done to you besides protect herself?"

"*She exists*." Voldemort explained, "And she killed your father, who was worth more to me than a *legion* of Draco Malfoys!"

Draco furrowed his brow in an effort to reach her. It was difficult, as if there was a layer to break through, a ward of some sort that dampened his attempts. He found her, but just barely. It was *thin*, like water where there was once a syrupy substance of information. She was frantic, her thoughts were of Harry, but communication slipped from his grasp.

"What are you doing?" Voldemort demanded.

Draco tried again, desperate to reach her, pushing his warning as hard as he could manage and their minds connected. At that very moment he was struck hard in the back of the head and the world went black.

* * *

Harry sat adrift in his little boat, not far from shore, but far enough that he could look upon the house as a whole, set high above, and take it all in. He realized it was his dreams he looked upon, with the girl he loved somewhere inside. This was what he wanted for himself, more than anything. To live here with Sara, to be happy, but the dream had been shattered and left in pieces. The same had been done to his heart.

He still wanted to marry Sara, this he knew, but how could he? How could he ignore the fact that she loved someone else? A small part of him didn't care, as long as she loved him, too, but reason pushed that smaller voice away. It was over, plain and simple. In two weeks he would return to teaching at Hogwarts and go on without her unless a miracle happened. But what miracle could he hope for?

Unless she was playing the cruelest of practical jokes, the only thing he had to look forward to was going through life with a broken heart.

A figure appeared near the landing and beckoned to him with big, sweeping motions. A faint voice

called, but the words were lost in the tumbling wake. Harry recognized Snape and sighed. He reflected on his dejection a moment longer, wishing he could stay in his boat all night, just staring across the Channel, and then he started the motor.

Snape waited until Harry piloted the little craft into the tunnel and then met him inside. "Come Potter."

He said, "The Headmaster waits for you."

Harry nodded and followed him to the library, his head hung in overpowering misery.

"Sit down." Dumbledore said and Harry chose a sofa separate from Sara's. Both faces were pale and blotchy; both showed signs of mental exhaustion. Sara cast her eyes to the floor and continuously sniffled. Harry glared at her, hurt and angry. Snape took up a casual pace before the fire. So far, he was silent.

"Sara, the hat may have been wrong about you. This will be a little easier to understand after you hear what Severus has to say, but I wouldn't call off your plans just yet."

Sara and Harry looked to Snape for answers, but Dumbledore continued. "Sara, the night Voldemort attacked you Nikolae and I noticed a small cut on your wrist. How did you get it?"

"I don't know."

"I didn't think you would. We have come to believe that Voldemort may have taken some of your blood for use against you. An attempt to sabotage your wedding."

Harry appeared confused. "Why would he care if we get married?"

"A union between the Elemental and his greatest adversary would prove rather inconvenient, don't you think? Together, the two of you are a threat he cannot match."

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"I see." Harry said and lowered his eyes. It made perfect sense to him and his guilt swelled because he already knew what Snape would tell them.

Snape turned and addressed them at last. "It was Nikolae who realized it." he explained, "All we knew was that the attack would be silent. Something we wouldn't suspect."

Dumbledore interjected. "*Brilliant.* I have to give him that."

"It appears Voldemort has used your blood to make an old and obscure potion. It's Dark magic, of course, most often performed by a Voodoo priestess. There is nothing to drink, it works remotely, which is why it is highly illegal."

"What are you saying?" Sara asked.

"That you aren't in love with Draco, unfortunately." He gave Harry a bitter sneer, and then turned back to Sara. "You told Nikolae you've only had these feelings since the attack and that it was like you'd taken a potion that won't wear off?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I said."

"Then it's the most logical explanation." Snape thought a moment, "Do you truly believe that you would suddenly have such a change of heart? Especially when Nikolae says you still want to marry Potter?"

Sara glanced nervously at Harry, who showed little emotion. "It doesn't seem likely. My feelings for Harry have not changed."

"Then why didn't you confess this affliction to someone sooner?"

"Because I was afraid. I thought I was mistaken. I tried to reason it away, but it remained." Sara's breath hitched, and the need to cry nearly strangled her words. "I thought that Harry would hate me for it."

"That," Dumbledore interrupted, "is exactly why the Sorting Hat placed you in Slytherin. Your deception was foremost on your mind and that's what it saw when it looked inside. I suggest you wait until tomorrow, Sara, and then put it on again."

Harry was looking brighter, not so dismayed, and his relief was enormous. He smiled at Sara, "Just so you know, not all Slytherins are terrible people."

Snape looked shocked to hear such words from Harry. "I can assure you, my dear, that Potter is quite correct *for once*." He sat beside Sara. "Besides, is it so bad to be in the house of which I am head?"

Sara burst into tears.

Harry smirked, unable to help it. "I guess that's your answer."

Dumbledore stood. "Then it's settled. The Hat will be waiting." He looked to Snape once again. "Do you have a counter-potion, Severus?"

"No. Since she didn't drink anything, there's nothing to counter. Our only hope is to find the potion and put an end to it. Until then, I may have something to dampen its effects, but it won't work any miracles."

Snape went out, promising to return soon with it. Dumbledore was heading to Grimmauld Place for some last minute planning. As soon as they were alone, Harry went to sit by Sara's side. "If it's true, Sara, then I'm sorry I got so angry at you. If it's a potion and not your true feelings, then I still want to marry you. If you'll have me, that is."

Sara threw her arms around him and begged forgiveness for not telling him sooner. He held her close and laid his head on her shoulder.

* * *

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Sara stood in the Lindenhamshire Cemetery on the outskirts of London, filled with regret and sorrow. She didn't have much time and had lingered too long already, but it was about time she made her apology. She'd said all she had to say, all except one thing.

"Greg," she said, clasping her hands respectfully in front as the noon sun shone down on her, "there is

still one secret I keep from Harry, though I was asked to keep it by my dear old uncle. I promised to withhold nothing from Harry, but I did it because you deserve vengeance. We *all* deserve vengeance. What was done to you will be repaid. I give you my word."

Sara hesitated, holding back the tears she wanted to shed for her friend. "Please don't blame Draco for your death. I saw in his mind what they did to you. It was forced upon him and even then he would have no part of it. He wanted to save you, but he was afraid. Never underestimate the power of fear. Besides love, it's the only thing in this world that could drive a person to do *anything*." She closed her eyes, overcome with emotion, and a few stray tears found their way down her face. "I love you, my friend. You will not be forgotten."

Sara stared a long moment at the headstone she'd bought for him, read the inscription one last time, and then left the cemetery. She returned to the Jaguar, parked on the little road that ran aside the graves. There were precious few hours left before Harry would leave for Hogwarts and she still had a trip to Surrey to make. The Dursleys had returned the RSVP card, refusing to come without regrets.

* * *

With the attack about to take place in only a few hours, his future wife under a spell that made her believe she was in love with someone else, as well as the idea of getting married in the wake of what could turn out to be a catastrophic failure, Harry had a lot on his mind. Throw in the endangered, unknown fate of Malfoy, helpless somewhere in the clutches of the Dark Lord, and he had all the ingredients for a full blown mental breakdown. However, Harry was keeping it together. *How* he was keeping it together he did not know, but the long flight on his broom helped, he was sure.

He landed and knocked, not surprised when Mrs. Weasley opened the door. She burst into smiles when she saw who it was, but her eyes flitted with an undercurrent of nervous trepidation.

"Well Harry, dear! Come inside this instant!" She grabbed him and pulled him into the house.

"ARTHUR!!" she yelled, "He's all in a fuss about *you-know-what* tonight and I can't say I'm much better off." She confided as she shoved a gingerbread muffin into his hand and sat him down at the table. "You must be looking for Ron. Sorry to say, but you've come all this way for nothing! He isn't here. Last time I saw him he was at headquarters, working out the final plans with Moody. Here, have some milk with it."

Harry had little appetite, but ate the muffin anyway. "Actually," he said with his mouth half full, "I'm here to see Ginny."

Mrs. Weasley stopped, surprised by this. "Ginny!?" She said, "Why, Ginny's out in back, weeding the garden with Justin."

"Oh." He said, having forgotten all about Ginny's now long-standing relationship with Justin Finch-Fletchley, the Ravenclaw Malfoy's *Serpensortia* snake had nearly attacked the day they all learned Harry could speak parseltongue. Even though they were twelve at the time, Justin had regarded Harry with a distrustful eye ever since. "Maybe I should have sent Hedwig ahead of time. I don't want to impose, but I need to talk to her and it won't take long. It really can't wait."

"Why Harry!" Arthur Weasley beamed when he entered, "What a pleasant surprise!"

"Hello." Harry said around the muffin, trying to eat it as quickly as possible.

"I was just putting the finishing touches on your wedding gift."

"Oh!" Harry said, wondering what muggle gadget Ron's dad had charmed for them this time. "I can't wait to see it!"

"Patience, my boy, *patience!*" Arthur wagged a finger and grinned with excitement, "You'll see it tomorrow!"

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"I guess I can wait one day." Harry smiled. "But I'm sure it's fantastic."

Arthur looked to Molly, confused. "Are we expecting Ron? He didn't say anything about coming home."

Molly gave him a knowing glance, "Harry's here to see Ginny."

"Ginny! Well... I did need Justin's help... um... doing something."

"Why don't you get him to help you move that *motorized wreck* you call a lawnmower out of the flowerbed!"

"Will do. Good plan." He jumped up, "Good to see you, Harry. Tell Sara hello for me and I'll see you tonight at Hogwarts!" With that he was gone before Harry could swallow and answer.

A few minutes later Ginny wandered in, her hands and clothes covered in dirt. She saw Harry at the table and took in a shocked breath, then realized she was filthy.

"I'd better see if your father needs some help." Molly announced and all but ran from the room.

Harry stood and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Hello Ginny."

"You should have said you were coming."

"Why? So you could leave before I got here?"

"No, so I wasn't a filthy wreck!" She went to the sink and washed her hands. "Just so you know, you've got a milk mustache."

Embarrassed, he wiped his upper lip. "You're not coming to the wedding, are you?"

"Does that surprise you?"

"It upsets me. Ginny, I thought we were ok with this? I thought we had it all sorted out? I'm marrying Sara and you're with Justin. I don't understand why we can't be friends."

"We are friends, Harry. It's not you, it's *her*. I hate Sara and you know it! Can you really expect me to celebrate the fact that you're marrying her?"

"Maybe not, but you could celebrate the fact that your friend is happier than he's ever been in his life."

"Are you? You're lying. You have what you thought you wanted, but it isn't the same is it? Hermione says Sara's different now. Hard almost. Ron calls her a lost soul."

Harry was irritated that his friends had said such things. "All she needs is a little time. Sara's still the same person. She's been through more than any of us could comprehend." He defended, "No, it's not the same, but I didn't expect it to be. She'll be ok."

"Wishful thinking."

"I shouldn't have come here." Harry said, feeling anger seep through his veins. "I *am* happy and I can't believe you just called me a liar. This isn't accomplishing anything." Harry turned, intending to leave.

"Wait."

He stopped and faced her again, but said nothing.

"I'll come. If it's what *you* want. If it makes you happy. I'll be there."

Harry smiled. "How can I get married without my *entire* family there?"

Ginny smiled, too. "I only want you to be happy, Harry."

"If you come, I will be." He hugged her and kissed her cheek. "Bring Justin."

* * *

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Sara parked the car on the street, knowing how they felt about the driveway, and walked the path to the front door. Someone peeked out at her and then dropped the curtain when she glanced at the window. Sara knew she wasn't welcome and couldn't care less. They would hear her or she would blast the door in and wrap them in wind until they screamed in terror and begged her for mercy if she had to.

Sara pressed the bell and was surprised when the door was opened. Two figures crowded the entrance and there were no welcoming faces. She was not invited in.

"Mr. and Mrs. Dursley." She gave a hint of a smile, "Do you remember me? Sara Lemke?"

Petunia scowled. "How could I forget?" she said, "I sent your invitation back with that wretched bird. Didn't you get it?"

"I did. That's why I'm here."

Vernon grew angry. "We aren't coming! We've seen the last of Harry Potter!"

"You're his only family and you *will* be coming!" Sara snapped, "He doesn't know I'm here and I'm not leaving until I have your word."

The door was slammed in her face.

Sara extended her hand and gave the door a subtle blast, blowing it open again and it hit the stop with a powerful bang. The Dursley's stood just inside, shocked, Petunia cowering behind her husband's protective arm and scowling at Sara over his shoulder.

"How dare you!" Vernon bellowed. "This is our home!"

"Watch this." Sara smirked. Darkness rolled across the sky and thunderheads crowded the sun as the trees that lined Privet Drive bent under gusts of high wind. Lightning flashed and the Earth trembled, all in a brief moment. The Dursley's watched the terrifying magnificence with frightened eyes and gaping jaws as Sara stood in the forefront, staring them down on the step. "You will be at Harry's wedding or you will deal with *me*."

"Leave us alone!" Vernon squealed. "We want nothing to do with it!"

"I don't care what *you* want. It's about time you thought of someone other than yourselves." Sara walked up to the threshold, but did not step inside. "Harry doesn't know you've refused to come." She explained, "He never needs to know about any of this, so don't blame him for my visit. Blame yourselves for being cruel and uncaring. You're his only living blood relatives. You're all he has and I won't let you ignore him."

Petunia ventured out from behind her husband, but only enough to address Sara. "What difference does it make? He hates us anyway. Why would he want us there?"

"Harry doesn't hate you. He hates the way you *treat* him. He smiles when you show him the smallest kindness, as I explained in the letter I sent when you gave him his father's watch." Sara's eyes softened. "Mrs. Dursley, you're his mother's sister. He wants to love you but you make it impossible. Do this one thing for him. As it stands, you've let him down his entire life."

Petunia said nothing, though the twist in her expression let Sara know she was having an inner struggle, considering what was said. However, Vernon's anger grew. "How can you force us to attend a wedding we *don't want* to attend? We're decent people! We have no interest in mingling around with freaks!" Vernon stepped forward and raised an accusing finger. "If you harm my family I swear I'll expose all this nonsense for what it is!"

"I will *not* harm your family. I'm a nice person, Mr. Dursley, one who is fed up with your cruel indifference toward the best and most kind-hearted person I have ever met. However, I *will* make it rain over your house for the rest of your lives if you refuse. Try explaining *that one* to the neighbors."

"That's impossible! Get out of here with this foolishness!"

"Impossible? I think not. Didn't Harry tell you what I am?"

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Petunia's scowl had returned. "A spoiled rich girl."

"Perhaps. I am also the *Elemental* and the only one of my kind. I control the elements, as I have already demonstrated." Now Sara did step inside and the door clicked shut behind her. The Dursley's backed into the wall. "Forgive my intrusion, but discretion is needed at this point I think. Since you doubt me, let me convince you further." Sara grinned as she drew static from the air and directed lightning across the room, smashing a glass vase full of wilting flowers.

Petunia uttered a frightened little scream and Vernon's face turned red. "You'll pay for that!"

Sara pointed a finger. "*Reparo.*" The vase became whole again at once.

The Dursleys gasped.

Just to illustrate the point, Sara muttered an old Romanian spell and a tiny storm cloud appeared over the vase, raining into it.

"Cool!" came the voice of a third party, having wandered in from the lounge.

Sara smiled. "Hello Dudley." She said, knowing how Harry hated his cousin. "It's nice to see you again."

"Can you really make it rain over our house?"

"Yes, but I won't if your parents go to the wedding."

"Can I go?"

"NO!" Vernon shouted, "Get back in there and don't come out! This is a dangerous person and I won't have my only son harmed!"

"I think she's pretty." Dudley said, not moving an inch toward where he had come. "She doesn't *look* dangerous."

Sara gave him a kind smile. "I'm *not* dangerous. I won't hurt you, Dudley. *Of course* you can come. We're to be cousins, after all."

She turned back to Vernon and Petunia. "It's a shame it had to come to this. I once extended a peaceful offering of friendship and *this* is what I get in return. Defiance and hostility! I'm to become your niece tomorrow and I'd like it if we could be friends, but truthfully, I don't care if you like me or not.

However, when what you do affects Harry I will *always* come to his defense. Magic exists whether you like it or not and there's nothing any of us can do about it. I think it's about time you accept the fact." Sara opened the door and hesitated. "Come to the wedding and this will be forgotten. You will receive nothing except kindness and protection from me. Don't come and you will meet my wrath as promised. How we go forward depends on the decision you make. I will send a car for you tomorrow at ten."

* * *

The train was waiting in the station when Sara stepped onto Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$. Most members of the Order of the Phoenix lingered in groups, talking in hushed voices and often glancing around. Harry stood with Ron and Hermione, as well as the rest of their wedding party: Seamus, Neville, Susan and Mary. Moody was talking to Snape, Tonks, and the entire Weasley family, including Charlie, Bill, and Ginny. Most of them were nodding in agreement. About thirty others stood around in small groups of three or five, waiting to board the train, which was due to leave at 2pm, ten minutes away. Now, seeing them all gathered here, the prospect of battle became very real to Sara and the first tremors of fear crept up her spine. She went to Harry's side and took his hand, turning worried eyes to nervous ones. "Hi." She said. "I'm late."

"Not really." Harry replied as he turned away from the others, "We just got here a few minutes ago.

Where did you run off to anyway?"

"Just some last minute errands."

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"Yeah, me too." He said, "Sara, you look scared."

"I'm terrified." She admitted, "Harry, we should have gotten married before this took place."

"I agree." He sighed, "But it was already planned for tomorrow and we had to use the information Dumbledore got from his informants, otherwise Voldemort *never* would have believed Malfoy. Their meeting was *tonight*. It's all we had to go on." He drew her into an embrace. "Don't worry. Nothing will happen to me. To any of us."

Sara hesitated, wanting to tell him about the secret she'd promised to keep, but the memory of her uncle's serious eyes reinforced her silence. "I hope that's true. If I lost you now I don't know what I'd do."

"You won't be losing anybody. I promise. Not even Malfoy."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but I'm really worried about him. Do you think he's ok? He hasn't tried to contact me since that frantic attempt yesterday. He was *yelling* into my head. I only wish I knew what he was trying to say. He was scared, Harry, and I can't help but think the worst."

"If he doesn't come out of this I'll never forgive myself." Harry's eyes grew pained and he looked at the floor.

"This isn't your fault. Don't blame yourself. He wanted to go. He wanted to redeem himself to all of us. Make up for what he's done. I just wish I could shake this bad feeling I have. I don't know if it's foreboding or worry."

Harry wanted to tell her he'd had a bad feeling, too, and it had yet to leave him, but kept it to himself. With the effects of the potion, he thought she might react badly and this was not the time.

"Dumbledore is certain Voldemort will strike when we leave Hogwarts. Ron and Moody have it all figured out. I just wish we had more people. No one believed us, as usual. Moody and Hermione tried to get the aurors in on it, but the attack wasn't ordered by the Minister of Magic. Still, we've got some of the strongest wizards alive on our side, we'll be just fine. Do you really think Dumbledore would lead us into an unwinnable situation?"

Sara tried to smile, but tears formed in her eyes. "I guess not."

The train's whistle blew and everyone prepared to board. Chatter grew louder around them and people bustled about.

"Why the train?" Sara asked, "Why not port keys?"

"Dumbledore completely blocked port keys."

"Oh." She said, wondering why Harry didn't realize that it made no sense. She knew it was because Dumbledore wanted the Order to be seen leaving on the train to Hogwarts.

"Bye Sara!" Hermione suddenly hugged her, "Stop worrying, we'll be alright! Won't we Ron?"

"With my planning, we can't help but win!" He grinned and hugged her, too. He was followed by Seamus, Susan and Mary, all promising to see her bright and early for the wedding. The crowd piled into the train, a few stragglers lingering with last minute conversation.

Sara threw her arms around Harry.

"I can't go." He said, "You're too weak to fight and I promised never to leave you."

"You have to! They don't stand a chance without you!" Sara said as the tears she'd tried to control made their way down her face.

"Nonsense!" He argued, "They're perfectly capable of defending themselves! They've got Dumbledore, they don't need me!" He held her so tight she could hardly breathe.

"I'll be fine, Harry. You go on now. Finish this once and for all."

"Potter," came Snape's low, confidential voice, "let's go. You'll see Sara again tonight. It's not the end of the world."

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Sara pulled away, giving him a discrete kiss, her eyes running with silent tears. "It's time." She said, "You have to go." She gave Snape a hug and kissed his cheek. "Be careful, both of you."

Harry kissed her again before being led away by the arm. Snape pushed him onto the train and into an empty car. Harry watched her out the window, his hands flat on the glass, his forehead rested against it. The black in her hair grew as he watched and it started to rain. She tried to smile as she stood with her hands clasped in front, the exact pose Draco often adopted, and it was all Harry could do not to bolt out the door. Snape knelt in his seat, a few rows forward, and looked back at him. There was no sarcasm in his voice. It was soft, consoling almost. "Enough of this, Potter. You're going to Hogwarts, not China."

"I promised never to leave her." He whispered.

"Childish nonsense, Potter. You have a job to do. I don't understand where you're coming from."

"Professor," Harry asked, his eyes glued to the girl who cried on the platform. "Have you ever seen anything so beautiful in your entire life?"

Snape was quiet a moment as he looked at Sara, sliding away as the train left the station, and thought of her mother. "No Potter." He said and sighed, "I haven't."

* * *

Sara watched until the train had passed into the distance, then sat on a bench and let her head fall into her hands. Reality rocked her peace of mind. She understood now what she would lose if they failed. What *everyone* would lose. Tears continued to streak her face and Sara cried quietly into her hands, resigned and full of fear.

"Could you stop that?"

Sara was startled by the voice, thinking herself alone on the platform. She looked up and there was Ginny, her eyes red, her face wet with tears. She sniffled and stared at Sara.

"What do you mean? You're crying, too!"

"Yes, but I'm not causing a downpour."

"I'm sorry." Sara tried to smile, "It's just that nearly everyone I love is on that train. In fact, come tonight, every single person I love will be in grave danger."

"I know what you mean." Ginny sat beside Sara on the bench, "My parents, my boyfriend, all of my brothers. Harry, Hermione. And here I am, left behind and *far from harm*." Anger flashed across her eyes. "I wish I'd been born a boy. Maybe then they wouldn't be so over-protective. I'm no coward; I can fight as well as anyone. I'm as brave and willing as any of them. I'm a Gryffindor! Yet here I sit with you!"

"Is that so bad?"

"I'm the only one excluded except a *sick person*. What a *wonderful* feeling."

"I'm not exactly excluded, Ginny. I have my own little part to play and a vital one at that."

Ginny was overcome by helpless frustration. "Even the *sick person* has a job to do! They think I'm a joke!"

"That's not what they think, but I have to admit, your family cares a little too much about you sometimes. You've as much right to defend our cause as anyone else."

"Thank you! At least *someone* understands!" Ginny frowned. "It *would* have to be *you*."

Sara was somewhat hurt by this, then an idea struck her and she turned to Ginny with sincerity in her expression. "I'll make a deal with you. If you'll agree to start over, stop hating me and judge me on my own merits instead of my relationship with Harry, I'll give you the chance to do your part."

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Ginny considered the proposal for only a brief moment. "I guess maybe I wasn't very fair to you, but I'd be lying if I said I'm agreeing because of that. I rather enjoy not liking you, but I'd do just about anything to get my hands dirty." Ginny sighed and smiled at Sara. "Since you're willing to give me the opportunity, I'm willing to give you a second chance."

Sara wiped her eyes. "Let's go."

* * *

The room swam in and out of focus and Draco closed his eyes again. He tried hard to steady himself, but he was dizzy, even lying down. His head throbbed, the pain was staggering, even with the toe ring.

and he felt nauseas. "I have a *concussion*." He whispered in the darkness of yet another little stone cell and his voice resonated in the emptiness. He pulled himself up with effort and vomited on the floor beside where he sat. Draco inched away so it would not touch his clothes, though even this small movement took great effort and he fought every second to maintain consciousness.

He held up his hand, not knowing if he had a wand or not, and muttered "*lumos*." Nothing happened. "*Inflamare*." He tried again, so desperate for light that a single candle came to life and the warm glow stabbed straight through his brain. Draco threw a protective arm over his eyes and vomited again, nearly losing his balance. After that, his head seemed to clear, though the force of getting sick made the throbbing that much worse.

Draco had no idea how long he'd been unconscious. Hours? Days? Had the battle been fought? Was Sara alive? Was Potter? He could only wonder since he was still in the catacombs. All he could do was wait for news.

As the hours passed like years, Draco grew thirsty. There was no water, no food, no lavatory, no bed, just a stone box and a puddle of puke that was beginning to smell most foul. The rancid stench had gagged him more than once and he nearly was sick again, but the pounding in his head convinced him to keep it down. He slid across the floor to the other side of the room.

At long last, the locks were drawn and the door opened, revealing Voldemort on the other side, flanked by The Tickler and the examiner from earlier.

"What?" Draco croaked, "Are you the goons of the day? I liked the pretty redhead better."

"Get up."

"I can't. I get dizzy when I try and if I move around too much then up comes lunch."

"*On your feet!*" Shouted The Tickler.

Draco struggled to stand, managed it, though his balance was wavering. Unrest tickled his stomach in disagreement. "I need water."

"You'll have some when I decide to let you have it." Voldemort sneered.

"Psycho."

"Come closer."

Draco stepped within two feet of the Dark Lord and when he felt it happening he was powerless to stop it. He threw up all over Voldemort's robes. Lord Voldemort bellowed in disgust and was quick to use his wand to get rid of it. Still, a great wet stain remained on the old fabric. Draco would have laughed, but felt himself fainting and only hoped he didn't hit his head when he met the floor.

* * *

A new ceiling greeted him and the throbbing was gone. So were the majority of the dizziness, the nausea and most of the pain. The enormous knot on the back of his head was diminished, but the injury remained.

"*Master!*" Draco heard from across the room, "*Malfoy is awake*."

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Moments later Voldemort was peering down at him as he lay on a table with a soft cushion under his head. "Wake me up," Draco said, "I'm having the *worst* nightmare. You wouldn't believe how *ugly* the people are."

"I see you're feeling better." Voldemort sighed, "Your sense of humor has returned."

"Who's kidding?" Draco asked and sat up, supporting his neck and trying not to move too fast. "Oh, hey there Einstein!" He smiled when he saw The Tickler was strapped to a slanted table, all his muscles contracting like writhing snakes beneath his skin. He screamed without rest, but no sound whatsoever came from his mouth. Draco used his telepathy to laugh at him. From the man's mind he saw images of the torture The Tickler imagined he might inflict on Draco when he got out of this and had his chance. Draco smirked.

Voldemort drew his wand and approached the restrained Death Eater, whose eyes widened with fear. A whispered spell brought a puff of sparkling greenish-black dust from the tip of the wand, identical to Harry's in every way, and the silent screaming stopped. It was replaced only with unrestrained horror as something unknown happened and Draco did not venture into the mind again to see.

Voldemort turned his attention back to Draco. "Do you see what happens when my orders are not followed correctly?" he indicated the slanted table, "He fractured your skull. You're lucky to be alive, Malfoy." Voldemort scowled at The Tickler. "That imbecile almost lost me my human shield."

"Your what?"

"You said it yourself. Harry Potter has promised that you would not be harmed unless you curse one of theirs. It only makes sense that you lead the attack on the Elemental, even if it requires an Imperious Curse. Not that she would harm my new general, given the chance."

"You need no curse. As long as I'm not being harmed I *couldn't care less* what the rest of you do."

Draco said, terrified of being made to act against his will. "One thing I must say, though. You'd be acting with unprecedented stupidity if you were to doubt Sara. She'll make short work of your *Evil Clowns*."

"I assure you I am no fool." Voldemort gave a sinister chuckle. "To ensure our success, every wizard who bears the Dark Mark will be there to surround her. *All* of them bearing muggle weapons alongside their wands. The Orb of Arassel is useless."

"*You sick bastard*." Malfoy seethed and did the only thing he could under the circumstances. He spit in Voldemort's face.

The Dark Lord drew his wand.

* * *

With Christina safe in the house, Ginny at work in the cave and the attack scheduled to take place in only an hour, Sara decided to force herself to eat. Her stomach was jittery and in knots. She had never feared confrontation since meeting Vanya, only did what needed to be done, but now that strength was fleeting. A light salad or a bowl of soup might relieve it if she could only manage to eat. She was afraid and it was such a helpless feeling.

Her arms were full of a large vase containing the roses she'd clipped in the courtyard, thinking a little serenity would ease her mind. The peaceful solitude had only given her time to think and thinking about it only made the feeling worse.

Sara screamed and the vase smashed on the floor, spilling roses everywhere and she fell back against the wall in surprised terror. "WHO ARE YOU!" She shouted at the shirtless, bulging fat man who stood at the stove, spatula in hand.

"It's just me." He grinned, "I stole the wrong hairbrush."

"Nikolae!"

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"Fat, hairy Nikolae, that is. This body is revolting! The potion couldn't wear off fast enough!" He slapped the great blubbery stomach that hung down over the sheet he'd tied around his waist. "I always wanted to be a Greek God. TOGA! TOGA!" He yelled, beat his furry chest like an ape and then laughed at his own musings. "Sorry about wearing you linens, but I have no clothes to fit a body such as this."

Sara laughed out loud as she repaired the vase and gathered the roses with a quick spell. "That's hilarious! My god, how long have you been like that?"

Nikolae checked a pocket watch he had tucked into the sheet. "Forty-seven minutes."

"Well, you're almost yourself again."

Nikolae turned off the stove. "Hungry? I made a stir-fry with forest mushrooms and zucchini."

"It's perfect!" Sara said as her eyes lit with delight, "I couldn't think of a single thing that I wanted."

"I thought something light would be best."

"And you were right."

"I usually am." He smiled and brought a plate to the table where she sat. "Especially when it comes to you."

"True." She gave him an appreciative smile, "You don't have to cook for me, though. That was nice of you."

"I would do *anything* for you, Nikita. Even cook while wearing a bed sheet."

The smile fell from Sara's face as the most brilliant and horrible idea came to her. "Do you mean that, Nikolae?"

He saw what was in her mind and his eyes grew solemn. "Yes." He whispered as the genius of it invaded his immortal soul with trepidation. "Even that."

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34. Smoke & Mirrors

The members of the Order did not make their way outside with brooms in hand, nor did they mount thestrals and take to the sky. Instead they were ushered into the secret apperation chamber beneath the Hogwarts library. Harry's confused questions went unanswered by Hermione and Ron who often glanced at each other for help. Finally, Ron shrugged his shoulders in apology. "Maybe you should talk to Dumbledore."

"Harry Potter!" came a voice, rising above the din. It was the Headmaster, calling to him and scanning the crowd.

Harry gulped and looked to his friends.

Hermione urged him to answer the summons. "You'd better go see what he wants!"

"Right." Harry muttered, not knowing why he was invaded by unease and his pulse quickened. The feeling of dread only grew as he made his way across the room. He approached the old wizard and waited.

"Harry," Dumbledore said, "there's something I need to speak to you about. I was waiting for Nikolae but he says he will meet us."

"What is it, sir?" Dumbledore seemed nervous and hesitant and Harry took it as a bad sign. "What haven't you told me *this* time?"

"You've always been intuitive." Dumbledore sighed, "Though I fear your reaction, I'm afraid."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "Then it has to do with Sara."

"I want you to remember that she kept this from you because I asked her to, though she wasn't comfortable with the idea and refused to lie if you asked outright."

Harry felt himself growing angry and was quick to reign it in. "Just tell me."

"As you wish." Dumbledore sighed again. "As you can see, we are not flying out to meet Voldemort. The battle will take place at your house in Princeton Heights."

"What?" Harry's heart started to hammer in his chest, "Sara's there alone!"

"I know. She'll be fine Harry. She agreed to do this."

"You used her as bait!"

"We did, but reluctantly. We had to consider Voldemort's mentality. Why take on all of us when one of his prime targets sits alone, weak, and unaccompanied?"

Harry's hands curled into fists. "I can't believe you!" he shouted, his anger escalating. "You're her uncle!"

All conversation stopped and the room turned its collective attention on the Headmaster and his

apprentice. Dumbledore noticed the silence and the eyes upon them and addressed everyone present. "You're all wondering why Harry is upset I imagine," There were nods and mumbled agreement. "It is because he has only just been told what is really happening here. He was not alone, for only those who needed to know were told." He took a deep breath. "Sara Lemke, the Elemental and Harry's future wife, has agreed to place herself in a position to lure Lord Voldemort into a trap at my request. It is there that we go tonight, to Harry and Sara's house, and that is why we are all crammed into this room. When we get the sign we await, we apperate as a group to ambush the Death Eaters."

This news was met with a mumble of surprise and concern. Harry simply glared at him.

"I'm going NOW!" Harry seethed, "Sara isn't strong enough to defend herself as you *well know!*"

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"Wait, Harry." Dumbledore placed a bony old hand on his shoulder, "We need you here. You'll know when the time comes. Sara said you always know when she needs you. Also, the locator you wear will give us foolproof indication."

"You can hear her telepathy. *I can't.* Besides, I'm not the only one in this room who has a locator. You can use Ron's or Hermione's. *I'm going.*"

"If you go then it's all for nothing. He will not attack her if you're there."

"What am I supposed to do then? Stand here and wait for her to get hurt?" Harry fumed, "You can't just rely on theory!"

"*Trust me.*" Dumbledore asked, looking Harry deep in the eye.

"I can't." He said, "Not this time."

"Then trust in Sara."

Harry looked at his mentor for a long moment before sitting on the steps, his eyes lowered to the floor, troubled.

* * *

Christina grew nervous as she watched Sara bustle about her bedroom, tossing various items into a backpack. Clothes, another one of those funny cloaks, other things she couldn't put a name to. Sara wore jeans, even though the night had turned out to be balmy and warm. Christina had never seen Sara wear jeans, though she didn't know why this struck her as odd. Didn't *everyone* wear jeans? Sara always wore skirts or pretty dresses and usually looked like a modern Gypsy with style and grace. Her relaxed manner was gone. Sara seemed on edge, her hair was pulled back and wrapped tight to her head and she was all business. She added a gleaming dagger to the bag and a tiny, rolled-up rug.

"No matter what, don't go outside for *any* reason. Stay out of the courtyard and off the balconies. Keep off the roof and don't go near any windows."

"Ok." Christina acquiesced, "But won't you tell me why? Where are you going?"

"Oh." Sara stopped to consider the complexity of explaining. "I'm just going outside."

"Right."

"Don't worry. Just stay wherever there are four solid walls. If anyone comes in I want you to hide until you're sure it's one of us."

"It's that man again, isn't it? The one who came to Draco's house?"

"It is." Sara sighed. "Promise me you'll hide. I'm not kidding. Besides, Draco will *kill me* if anything happens to you!"

Finally, Christina smiled. "Will he be coming back tonight?"

"I don't know." Sara admitted as jealous anger shot through her at Christina's obvious affection for Draco. "Now promise."

"I promise to hide until I know it's safe."

Sara shouldered her pack and put a hand on Christina's arm. "Now *keep* that promise!"

* * *

Sara found Nikolae waiting in the coat room near the front entrance, wearing the sheet wrapped twice around and tied on one shoulder. She again laughed at his appearance. "I can't get over it." She said as she beheld him. "It's so bizarre." She dumped the bag onto the floor and each took what they would need. Sara looked at her watch and took a deep breath. "It's time, Nikolae. I have to go out now." With frightened eyes he drew her into an arduous embrace, resting his head against her cheek. His breath was cold on her skin and Sara's hand touched the back of his head, smoothing his satin hair. Nikolae hesitated.

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"Go on." She said, "Do it."

The vampire sank his sharp fangs into her neck and Sara gasped, though his bite was the very meaning of gentleness. He took from her only the smallest drink and trembled as he pulled away.

Sara smiled and kissed his face. "I love you, Nikolae. Whatever happens, I want you to know that."

Nikolae pressed a square of linen against the small wounds and kissed her in return. "I have loved every Elemental that has lived for a thousand years, but only Antonya is closer to my heart. There is such passion in you, Nikita, even when you suffer. There is such beauty in you that one must risk death to protect it or die from the pain of its loss."

Sara was overcome with emotion and tears leaked from her eyes as she put her arms around him. When she pulled away there were tears in his eyes as well.

"Nikolae!"

"It's your blood, Nikita. It elicits such emotion! How does one live with such pain and desperation?"

"I'm nearly overwhelmed with it."

"Then you understand me at last, my friend."

"Yes. And can only respect you more for it.

"Come," she said and led him to the door. "I don't want them coming into the house to find me. We're having a party here tomorrow."

He smiled as she opened the door, then left her with the swoosh of a black cloak.

* * *

A girl with platinum hair that held the soft, silvery moonlight, lovely fine features, and a stomach full of butterflies stood on the edge of the cliff until the feeling had grown intense. Danger was coming, lots of it, and she turned back toward the house, walking slow, wandering really, with her cloak swirling around her. The winds were from the north and they brought the scent of death, so detectable as to be obvious. She wondered if they knew.

It seemed to happen in one suspended fraction of time. One moment she was alone in the middle of the yard between the house and the cottage, the next she was surrounded by a blur of black and white. Dark cloaks swooped down as if they were made of the night sky. White masks blinked past her eyes like shooting stars. She turned around and around, confused by their number, and having frantic second thoughts.

There was no time to think. No time to prepare a defense. She caught a glimpse of their weapons in the pinkish glow of the Orb. Then she heard the mind-shattering explosion of gunfire, clapped her hands over her sensitive ears and screamed. The bullets ripped through her body, blood spilled down the front of her white cotton dress. It stained her hair and the ground at her feet. Collapsing to her knees, she struggled to breathe, but her organs were failing, torn to shreds and bleeding life from her body. One last bullet slammed through her chest, chasing the pain to new heights and she fell to the ground, staring up at the Dark Mark, floating high above like an epitaph.

* * *

Draco stood in front of the Dark Lord, facing Sara, his eyes glued to her body, unable to breathe. He'd tried to run to her while the bullets were blazing, but he was stopped by a strong hand on his collar. Now, in the silence, in the smoky stillness, his voice broke free.

"SARAAAAA!!!" He screamed, unable to stop, frantic, panicked and terrified. Hysterical with the thought that what he saw before him was not a dream, it was not a hallucination, nor a trick of the light.

"SARAAAAA!!!"

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He was running, though he had no knowledge of his actions, he could think only of her, of *getting* to her. He stopped short and dropped to his knees in a crimson pool. He knew instantly that there was no saving her. Her body was broken, torn, and all the blood she possessed had left her it seemed and he had never known such loss. Sara meant more to him than *anyone*. She meant *so much* to him, she was everything! His friend, his driving force, the only opinion that had ever mattered. She had changed him from the moment they'd met, made him a better person, and she had loved the person he'd become. Now she was gone. Never to cast her radiant smile upon him again. And she lay like this; she had *died* like this for no clear reason. Only because she existed and nothing more.

Draco wished they would open fire on him as he took her lifeless hand and kissed it, wishing he could go wherever she was because he didn't want to live in a world where she *didn't* exist. His heart was bleeding, tortured, as if it was stuck through with a poison blade, twisting, twisting, until he thought he could die from the hurt it caused. Draco went on screaming with the greatest pain he had ever known as the Death Eaters looked on and laughed at him. He screamed her name until his voice was spent and his pleas came out in a hoarse whisper, choked with tears.

A familiar voice came into his head as he held her hand against his cheek. *Draco*. It said, *Get down!*

* * *

She simply couldn't help it. She *had* to look. Any living, breathing, *thinking* person would have to look. The explosion of noise, which sounded like the rupture of gunfire, had shaken the windows and now there was nothing except the unmistakable *absence* of noise, divided by one person's muffled screaming. Christina moved the curtain only the slightest bit as she sat on the floor, off to the side so there was no silhouette, and peeked out. The first thing she saw was a sea of white masks, lustrous like old bones in the moonlight, like pristine porcelain. The cloaked figures who wore them stood in a semi-circle, staring in one general direction. As Christina followed their collective gaze, her eye caught on a lone mask, so white it nearly glowed, lying on the ground, discarded.

Someone, she whispered, *has seen The Phantom of the Opera one too many times*.

She had to peek out a little more to widen her view, but didn't dare open the drapes any further. She moved to the window's other side with the greatest care, afraid of attracting the attention of the frighteners. Her pulse quickened at the thought and she considered where she should hide if someone looked up.

It was easier to hear this close to the glass and she now discerned the laughter of many, and that single tortured voice had grown hoarse, but was distinguishable. And it was *familiar*. It almost sounded like a name being called in absolute terror - or maybe horrified *shock* was more like it. It was the most *awful* sound and it hurt Christina's heart to hear it. That one voice was the very essence of grief.

She pulled the curtain out only a centimeter, but it was enough to make out two figures in the night. Immediately she recognized Draco and her heart raced, knowing he was alive and here at the house, but dread encompassed her when she realized it was his voice she'd heard. A voice that had now gone quiet, broken and exhausted. He knelt on the ground, looking down on the second person, cradling her hand against his face. Christina was sure this figure was a woman because silvery golden hair fanned

out around her, full of a dark and shiny substance she took to be mud. Her rational mind whispered as she watched, *the ground is warm and dry*, it said, *the grass is thick. There is no mud*. Christina pushed this knowledge away, unable to deal with the implications of it. It was obvious who the girl on the ground was. The horror of Draco's screams echoed through her head and Christina came to realize that Sara was dead. Tears filled her eyes, yet something seemed odd. Out of place.

To her surprise, an entire group of people quite suddenly appeared, drawing sticks from their cloaks at once and those in front yelling nonsense words at the frighteners. It made no sense, what happened next, as white masks flipped through the air or fell to the ground, still attached to the wearer. Flashes of gunfire marked the black cloaks, but the bullets appeared to turn around somehow and strike those who had issued them. Not one of the newcomers fell.

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Draco threw himself over Sara's unmoving body, close to the ground, just as a thick, crackling blanket of what could only be described as static electricity rolled like a wave through the enormous group of frighteners and many sharp cries were heard as their metal guns channeled the high voltage into their hands and then exploded with trapped ammunition. Many collapsed; others dropped their weapons and reeled from the jolt. Some scattered, but one remained at the forefront, unflinching and unharmed.

* * *

Harry's breath stopped dead in his throat. His heart stood still as his eyes found Draco in the darkness. Red streaked his platinum hair; blood smeared the side of his face and oozed from his neck. He held a bloodied hand and stared into the sky, oblivious to the engagement that erupted around him.

Harry felt a curse dissolve against his dragon hide cloak, but the battle had faded from his focus. The world had grayed until it was a silent blur around him and nothing existed except Draco and Sara. He did not know he was screaming, or that he was moving forward. He did not know that Dumbledore was trying to get to him, stop him before he reached her. Harry could only see the blackened holes in Sara's red dress, the torn flesh on her arms and legs, the blood in her hair, and her blank eyes, staring up at the stars, glassy and half closed.

"HAAAAARRRRYYYYY!!!!!" Dumbledore shouted as he ran through the many wizards, desperate to reach him, knowing what manner of terror must be fueling the boy's frantic abandon. "HARRY STOP!!"

Harry's knees dropped into the syrupy, sticky puddle beside her, his eyes wide, unable to breathe, silent and struck with disbelief. He did not feel the book he concealed press hard into his ribs or recall the wand in his hand. His heart slammed against his chest, he felt sick and his every sense betrayed him. His eyes blurred, his mind and body were numb. Harry did not feel Draco's hands on his shoulders or hear his shouted words. He could see only Sara's blood-smeared face.

A mangled bullet tumbled from her side and onto the ground beside her and Harry's breath hitched as reality tried to invade him. Draco took the bullet and held it in front of Harry's face, yelling in his ear, but Harry did not hear and the hand was invisible to him, blurred and unfocused.

"HARRRRYYYYY!" Dumbledore bellowed, defending himself as he ran, colliding with others as they moved about in the chaos.

"POTTER!" Draco shouted, "LOOK AT ME!"

* * *

Ginny accepted the cloak and the little flying carpet as she stood on the roof, unafraid and confident of victory. "The boat is tied by the entrance to the tunnel. I've set up a good system and it's all go with me, so you'd better get going. Good luck." She said and brought the cloak around her shoulders, pulled the hood over her face, and disappeared.

* * *

Christina held her breath as Harry collapsed at Sara's side. Tears rolled down her face as she imagined how he must feel and knowing he didn't deserve such agony. Not Harry. Christina thought Harry Potter deserved only the best things in life. She had never met someone like him before, who elicited her greatest respect in mere minutes. She thought he had the heart of a saint and it killed her to see him in such pain.

It also upset her to see the elderly man Harry and Draco called "Professor" and Sara referred to as "Uncle Albus" running across the expanse, through the crowd, and calling to Harry loud and clear. She was touched by the urgency in his concern and knew Harry needed such empathy and kindness right now. Harry, she knew, would never be the same again. Christina saw how he looked at Sara, how he sometimes touched her face with such gentle affection that to look on was soul-stirring. One could only be envious of Sara, of *anyone* who is shown such intense and unconditional love. Now the object of that love lay dead before him and his countenance held absolute decimation.

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Harry didn't move, simply knelt there beside her, his face pale in the moonlight and visibly overwhelmed, devastated, and in agony. He was catatonic, refusing to acknowledge Draco, who shook him, yelled and carried on. It annoyed her that he would have such disrespect for Harry's loss, regardless of the fighting all around them. She wanted to go downstairs at once, venture into the midst of it and demand he leave Harry alone, but then she recalled Draco's own anguished screams and was sorry for her anger. She didn't know how they felt; losing someone so dear to them. She could only aspire to understand. With the small exception of peeking out the window, Christina decided to honor her promise to Sara, now more than ever.

At last the old man threw his arms around Harry and dragged him to his feet, turning his face away from the body. Draco stood beside them, pointing frantically at Sara, holding up a small glinting

object, though his words were lost in the confusion. People lay everywhere, presumably dead, most in white masks. Christina once again grew scared when she saw the masks outnumbered Harry's companions by maybe 70. Their numbers were small, perhaps 35 in all, but they were holding their own, *whatever* it was they were doing.

However, the masks had encircled them and were pressing in on all sides, with Harry, Draco, Uncle Albus, and Sara at the center of it.

Out of the corner of her eye, Christina caught movement near the front of the gathering, outside the ring and toward the road. A dark figure flew through the air and she watched it land as the sky flashed purple and thunder rolled across the clouds. Her curiosity overtaking her compassion for Harry, she watched as lightning shot forth from this figure and many white faces fell to the ground. The evertightening ring was broken and those who remained fled at once to either side. Christina's breath caught in her throat.

* * *

Harry tried hard to follow what was being said. He couldn't believe what he'd seen, but the feeling had been replaced with disbelief of another sort as he struggled to take in what they were trying to say. He looked from one pleading, worried face to the other, then back again, looking for truth. Looking for understanding.

"Look Potter!" Draco shouted with red-rimmed eyes and tears still drying on his face, pointing frantically at the ground around her, "The bullets have come out! We're *not* making this up!"

"Use your intuition, Harry!" Dumbledore told him, "I know you can sense it! Look at your locator!"

Harry gave each face a blank stare.

"Potter! You *must* know it's true!"

Something happened far behind them, though no one cared to investigate why the Death Eaters had chosen to break formation, but were glad when the Order filled the gap and went back on the offensive, though it was doing them little good. No one had expected Voldemort to have such a large gathering and the Order was simply outmatched. They were losing, but only two had fallen by Dumbledore's count. Two they couldn't bear to lose. Dead or alive had yet to be determined.

"Harry," Dumbledore said in his gentle voice, "The fingers are moving."

Harry allowed himself to be turned and once again his eyes found her face, but something had changed. She no longer stared at the sky, the lids had fallen shut and then he noticed the movement. Her hands clutched at the grass and her back arched as bullets surfaced and spilled to the ground as though she were pushing them out through an act of will. "How..." he choked, "*how can it be?*"

"I told you, Potter! Sara is fine! She spoke to me, she attacked the Death Eaters!"

"Harry," Dumbledore smiled warmly, "*This is Nikolae.*"

"Polyjuice potion, Potter! He's a *vampire!*" Draco explained, glad to finally end Harry's suffering.

"He's immortal! He *can't die!*"

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Harry smiled and then laughed. Then he collapsed to his knees and sobbed into his hands with no other way to express his relief.

* * *

Christina looked from one to the other. It was dark, but not dark enough to be mistaken. It was Sara. Sara dead on the ground.

Sara throwing lightning at the frighteners, fifty yards away.

She should have seen it before. Sara had left the house wearing jeans and with her hair wrapped in a bun. The Sara on the ground was wearing a white dress, saturated with blood. *How could it be?* she wondered. Did Sara have a twin? How did she *fly in* off the roof? How did she manage to direct the lightning with her outstretched hands? How were people hurt by being on the receiving end of a *pointed stick*? Christina was dizzy with the impossibility of what she'd seen. Of what she still saw happening right outside the window.

As Harry's defenders pushed back the encircling threat, the 'real' Sara slipped into their midst, anonymous.

* * *

Draco went down on his knees as the wounds in Nikolae's body closed and healed, now mostly rid of their bullets. He placed a hand on Harry's shoulder and Harry raised his eyes. "She tried to tell you."

He whispered, "But you can't hear her voice."

Harry threw his arms around his childhood rival and Draco pulled him into a fierce embrace. He held on for a long moment, his eyes falling closed, ridding himself of all the anguish he'd felt in the comfort of this single gesture. When he'd thought Sara was dead, it was Harry he'd thought of.

Harry pulled away, the hug becoming almost immediately odd and uncomfortable, but for those few moments it was necessary, welcome, and the only thing in the world that was real.

"Potter!" Draco said, his face lighting up as he stared into the crowd. "*It's her!*"

"*HARRY!!*" They heard from perhaps twenty paces away and Harry's eyes snapped up, frantic to find the source in the many faces.

* * *

"Ron!" Hermione yelled as she out-cursed yet another Death Eater, "Ron! What do we do? We can't hold them much longer!"

"Where's Moody?" He yelled back, busy with his own advancing threat. "We need help!"

"He's hurt!" She answered, not knowing if this was true. She'd seen Moody fall, saw wizards in white robes bearing prominent red crosses and the words "St. Mungo's" in bold black letters carry him off, as

they did with the wounded Death Eaters, too, but she did not know his fate. "Think fast! We need a plan!"

At the sound of splashing, both turned in surprise and watched as two nearby Death Eaters burst into flames and screeched as they burned, their black cloaks blazing orange, igniting their hair. The ties that held their masks burned and fell away.

"What the *bloody hell* was that?!" Ron shouted, now standing back-to-back with Hermione as they talked around curses and blocked strong offensives.

"It smelled like alcohol." She told him, "I don't know! I didn't see anything!"

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A third and fourth person backed into them on either side, forming a solid 360 degree defense. Susan hurled curses without hesitation or pause for breath, saying anything that came to her and the strategy was working quite well. Even simple spells, such as her favored combination of *Expelliarmus* and *Patrificus Totalis* had a hindering affect and she directed them without tactic. Seamus had always been a bungler with a wand but was still on his feet. "Did you see that?" He yelled, "*Who here* can set people on fire??" "Besides you?" Hermione tried to jest.

"It's not possible!" Ron bellowed, "I bet Dumbledore can't even manage *that*!"

"You're right!" Hermione agreed, "It's *not* possible! But didn't you hear the splash?"

"I heard it!" Susan offered, "It smelled like liquor! We were right next to it!"

"It smelled like Swill!" Seamus shouted.

Again came the sound of liquid pouring as though from a bucket and three more Death Eaters burned and ran from the gathering, heading straight for the cliffs though a wide path that cleared for them. Without hesitation, they leapt over the edge; their only thoughts of getting into the water.

"Sara can throw fire!" Seamus recalled.

Hermione burst into tears.

Seamus wondered at this. "Where's Harry?"

"With Sara." Ron answered with an unsteady voice. "Voldemort's people killed her before we got here."

"No they didn't!" Susan yelled, "We just saw her not two minutes ago! She was calling to Harry!"

"It's true, mate!" Seamus confirmed, "She looked perfectly fine to me!"

Hermione laughed through her tears, knowing Sara must have been clever enough to use a decoy. She'd only glimpsed the body as they had been immediately engaged in battle, and had seen Harry's reaction to what she'd thought was obvious.

"And just in case you two didn't realize it," Seamus added, "*we're losing*. Tonks is down and so is Mary."

"Mary!" Hermione gasped, "Where's Neville?"

"Hurt, but he's ok. They're fixing him up."

"Who else?"

"Tom." Susan announced, "From the Leaky Cauldron. He was still moving, though."

"We need to find Dumbledore!" Ron shouted, "Before we're *all* on the ground!"

* * *

Finally, she pushed her way through and threw her arms around him. She kissed his face as he held her so close there was no room left to breathe.

"I thought..." he said as his eyes fell closed, unable to believe she was here with him, alive and unharmed.

"I know. Harry!" she soothed him, "I tried so hard to tell you! I knew what you would think. All I could do was tell Uncle Albus and Draco and hoped they got to you first. I'm sorry." She kissed him, "I'm so sorry you had to see that."

"I thought you were *dead*!"

"It's ok now." She whispered, "I saw it in the Orb. They would have killed me, Harry. I didn't know what else to do."

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He kissed her, having been struck by yet another curse, reflected off his dragon hide cloak, sent by Charlie Weasley from Romania one year as a birthday gift. "Get back in the house." He told her, looking around at the failing battle. "This isn't going to plan."

"What do you mean?!"

"There are twice as many as expected!"

"I'm not leaving your side."

Harry knew better than to argue. "Then take my cloak and *stay close*!"

Sara dropped to one knee and took the Orb from Nikolae's finger, returning it to her own. Nikolae was alert, but still recovering.

I need help, Nikita. He said through tired thought, *Draco's blood wasn't enough.*

Without pause, Sara grabbed a recently fallen Death Eater and dragged him to Nikolae's side. The vampire lifted his head with effort, still in the image of Sara, and sank his teeth into the wounded man's throat.

Splash!

Poof!

"Look out!" Harry cried and pulled Sara hard aside as more burning figures rushed past.

"Don't worry!" She told him, "That's just my secret weapon."

"Sara?" He shouted back through the roar of noise around them, "Why isn't the Orb working?"

She glanced at the dark Orb and looked him in the eye. "Because I'm not afraid."

* * *

Dumbledore pointed his wand at his own throat. "*Sonorus!*" He spoke above the noise, whispering so not to alert the surrounding town. "ORDER OF THE PHOENIX! REGROUP! *REGROUP!!*" He repointed the wand. "*Quietus.*"

The exhausted and battered witches and wizards followed orders at once, forming a tight group in the center, surrounded by a thick ring of Death Eaters with Voldemort standing at the rear. Watching his enemies drop in number.

"Harry," Dumbledore kept his voice low, "We can't win this. We have to withdraw!"

"No!" Harry disagreed. "Not yet! We've still got maybe twenty. It's enough!"

Ron squared his shoulders and blocked a curse. "*I'm not giving up! I can take down a good lot before I drop out!*"

"Professor," Seamus added, "We're staying. *All of us.*"

"So be it," he sighed, thinking twenty against 65 were terrible odds.

"Um..." Hermione's frightened voice drew their attention, "We might want to reconsider."

All looked around and saw why she shook with fear.

The Orb of Arassel erupted with pink light.

At least forty feral vampires, the mindless, common ones that could not be reasoned with, were running straight at them from within the trees. Arthur Weasley put his arms around his wife. "We're going to die." She whispered.

Voldemort raised a confident finger, pointing straight at the huddled Order. "*Kill them all.*"

A figure pushed through the tight group, fast, barely seen and emerged in the path of the vampires.

* * *

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"HA HA HA HA!" Came a thick, deep, bellowing voice from outside the circle, now a horseshoe as the Death Eaters made way for the new attackers. The vampires had all stopped short, which confounded Voldemort. He trained his eyes on the direction of this unfamiliar laughter.

"Who are you?!" He demanded, "More defenders of Dumbledore's? Come to be slaughtered with the rest of them?" This earned a good round of laughs from his followers.

"We are the People of Keltse-tia. We come to protect the Elemental and all who defend her!"

Many gasps of delighted surprise came from the Order.

Ron grinned with relief and shouted his welcome. "Well, you've got bloody good timing!"

Voldemort ignored Ron, his eyes fixed on the tall burly man who led the villagers. "You're too late.

The Elemental is dead. Let's hear your laughter now!"

"Are you so blind that you do not see the light of the Orb of Arassel? The Elemental is hardly dead!

And I was laughing because only a *fool* would send feral vampires to face a superior of their species!

HA HA HA! They'll do whatever a cognizant vampire tells them to!"

Now all the villagers were laughing and Voldemort was growing impatient. "I saw the Elemental die with my own eyes. Don't think Dumbledore can fool me with his smoke and mirror magic tricks!

Besides, there is no such thing as a *cognizant vampire!*"

"That's what you think," came a youthful male voice and the girl in the bloody dress stepped further out. "Don't you know a predator when you see one?"

The Death Eaters took in a collective breath at what they took to be Sara, alive and undead and speaking with a voice that was not her own.

"Behold," The burly man grinned, "The Vampire Nikolae, who we proudly call our own."

Voldemort faltered, seeing this costly mistake for what it was and stalled for time. "What do you expect to do with twenty-five farmers and some women?"

Dimitri, the leader, grinned and gave another hearty laugh. "Twenty-five farmers, some women, and *forty or fifty vampires.*" He turned to the crimson smeared girl with respect in his eyes. "Nikolae, whenever you're ready."

The Death Eaters attacked at once and a moment later the vampires were on them. The white masks of Voldemort fell to the ground in numbers. They were lifeless, dead as dead could be, and had been drained of blood. All of this took place in mere moments and in flashes. While none of them could move as fast as Nikolae, they were still swift as the wind. Many were quickly cursed or were confused and Sara had yet another idea. "Harry!" She said, "Lift me up on your shoulders!"

Harry did without question, not knowing what she meant to do, but it was quick to come clear. Sara, under the protection of Harry's cloak, raised her hand in the air and the light of the Orb reached the outer ring of Death Eaters. Members of the Order whose wands failed them moved inside and those who were immune took to the forefront and led a passionate assault. Nikolae led the villagers on an exterior attack, taking down scores of Voldemort's army who had no power thanks to Sara and the ring she wore.

Dumbledore battled with Voldemort, mostly to keep him from cursing Sara as he was the only one who could. Harry passed her to Mr. Weasley, who was tall enough to lift her high and whose magic had failed him. Harry took up position next to Draco, who glanced at him, grinned and winked as Death Eaters continued to run from the crowd, trailing flames. "Hell of a night for a barbeque, Potter." He laughed, "*Avada Kedavra!*"

"Malfoy! We can't use the killing curse!"

Draco looked at Harry as though he'd lost his mind. "Are we really supposed to kill them all with

Riktusempra?"

"It's the rules, Malfoy! It's not our place to decide who lives or dies, they will be brought to justice! Unforgivable curses are illegal! Are you willing to spend your life in Azkaban just to kill a Death Eater?"

"Depends which one you mean."

"Harry!" Hermione yelled, "The vampires are leaving!"

It was Sara who answered, from her place on Arthur Weasley's shoulders. "Nikolae says they've had their fill."

"Great!" Ron bellowed, "What do we do now?"

Harry glanced around. "It looks like we've evened the score, but I don't understand! Why are so many still standing?"

Splash!

Poof!

"Because!" Draco shouted, "These stupid baby curses are being reversed by their cohorts!"

Hermione grew frustrated as her exhaustion mounted. Her shoulders slumped inside her auror's robe.

"Just keep fighting!"

* * *

It was incredible, *unbelievable*, what had just taken place. It was dark, though it took little effort to see. There were the gas lamps that lined the cliffs, the ever-present moon, plus an odd pinkish-purple luminance, held aloft by the real Sara and every two or three minutes live fires would run shrieking through the diminished crowd, lighting the way as they went. The *incredible* thing was that this was not the unbelievable part.

Christina was still reeling from the sight. Her heart had seized when the bloodied, mangled, undisputedly *dead* body of the 'other' Sara emerged on the far side of the battle to face a regiment of human-like beasts, only to be joined by a small group of cloaked newcomers. The fighting nearly stopped while words were exchanged, but the calm lasted only a few moments. It was then that the beasts attacked the frighteners, going straight for the throat like rabid dogs. The scene was horrifying, but Christina swelled with hope. As it was, the heroic defenders were surrounded and outnumbered three to one.

The leader of the frighteners, the Dark One, fought hard with Uncle Albus and amazing things happened in rapid succession between them. She could have let her eyes linger on them until the conclusion, but the fact that the home team was barely holding its own had her heart racing as the savior beasts ran away one by one. Hope, it seemed, was to be short lived.

It was then, in the midst of her doubt, that a small army of creatures with long, pointy ears and enormous eyes appeared in the west side of the sprawling lawn, as if they had marched in from the road. She knew they had not. Even though Christina hadn't been looking in that direction and only realized their presence through periphery vision, she thought she might have noticed a hundred or so little bug-eyed creatures carrying mini torches before they came to a stop fifty yards away. All of them wore ratty old garments, much as Christina herself had worn until she met Draco, except they were more like sack dresses, tied at the shoulders. The one who stood apart was the lone exception. He wore little clothes, modeled after normal people.

The Dark One, who still battled with Uncle Albus, called to his followers. "Fall back! *FALL BACK!!*"

He yelled and pointed his wand at the ground. A curse took the old man off his feet and threw him over the heads of the masked minions. Nikolae, now in his natural form and wearing a black cloak he'd taken from a fallen frightener, appeared just in time to catch Albus before he hit the ground.

The frighteners were now in group formation, the thirty or so who were left, with their backs to the cliffs and a sea of white masks staring across at the good guys, who now stood before the newly arrived army. Sara was placed on the ground and the light she held went dark.

"*DOBBY!*" Harry shouted.

"I promised," the little elf shouted back, "never to help Harry Potter again. So, Dobby has brought every house elf at Hogwarts to help everyone else!"

"Dobby!" Harry grinned, "I could *kiss* you!"

The elf appeared shocked by this. "Dobby has *never* been *kissed* by a wizard, sir!"

So that's it! Christina thought, they're wizards! It all made sense! The cloaks, the robes, and the sticks, of course, were magic wands! She smiled with this revelation, *but HOW COULD IT BE???*

Harry laughed out loud. "Come on, Dobby. It seems we have a fight to win."

The night erupted with the sounds of snapping, so many that it became a continuous drone, like the prolonged crackle of static. The creatures did not storm the frighteners, they were simply standing there at one moment, the next they had infiltrated the group. They also didn't stay and have long battles with their chosen opponent; they blinked in just long enough to cause some damage, then blinked out and appeared someplace else. The frighteners were harming each other trying to curse a creature who was no longer there and when the little elves withdrew, there were only 14 frighteners standing. Christina thought it odd that not one of them had attacked the Dark One.

* * *

The Death Eaters fled. Voldemort tried to rein them in, but he was surrounded by the most unlikely of armies and all eyes were on him. He had almost no support remaining, save a handful of his most faithful minions. Draco was happy to see The Tickler was still available for a little revenge. His head still hurt, after all. A few of the others were casting spells from the woods to no avail. One of these

burst into flames and flung himself off the cliffs.

Splash!

Pool!

The elves gathered behind the Dark Lord's group and forced them further into the yard where they were surrounded. Voldemort cast a shockwave spell that struck the little creatures hard enough to break their bones and blew many into the air, tumbling head over heels until they hit the ground. Several of them sat up, dazed. A few did not. Sara sent a fatal bolt of lightning, as she was enraged by this, but Voldemort deflected it easily.

Harry looked around at the remnants of the Order. Draco, Dumbledore, Sara, Ron, Hermione, Arthur and Molly Weasley, Charlie, Snape, Nikolae and Susan Bones. Only five of the villagers remained.

"What's the plan?" Harry asked no one in particular. "How do we do this?"

"We should all attack him at once with the same spell." Hermione announced. "With so many of us, he'll have no defense strong enough to resist it."

Dumbledore smiled. "Right you are, Miss Granger."

"But what spell should we use?" Ron wondered.

Snape sneered and raised his voice. "How did *you* get into the *Wizard Defense League*? Isn't the spell *obvious*, Weasley? Any first year would know it!"

"What is it we want to accomplish?" Dumbledore asked, "What spell will weaken his ability to fight us more than any other?"

"Avada Kedavra?"

Susan had the answer and whispered it excitedly to the others. "*Expelliarmus!*" Charlie's wand flew from his hand. Susan cringed. "Oops! Sorry."

"Of course!" Ron agreed and Hermione rolled her eyes. "He can't fight us if he has no wand!"

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Draco scowled at Ron. "Bravo, *Weasley!* How's it feel to be the only one who *doesn't get it*? Even the *Hufflepuff* knew!"

"And what is that supposed to mean, *Malfoy*?" Susan seethed, "Are you saying the *Hufflepuffs* are a stupid lot? If so, then perhaps you should hear what the rest of us think of the dirty *Slytherins!*"

Sara looked to Harry, horrified. Harry looked to her as well, hoping she hadn't heard.

"Shove off, *Carrots*. Don't be such a whiner."

Ron came to her defense at once. "You got something against *red hair*, *Malfoy*?"

Hermione chuckled. "Yeah, *Malfoy*. You might want to look around because you're *surrounded* by it."

She paused, wearing a satisfied smirk as Draco glanced around and saw how true this was. Susan Bones, *four* Weasleys and now Fred and George limping back from the hospital area with Finny supported between them. "*Red heads* and *Hufflepuffs* are good enough to *defend* you, keep you safe from Voldemort, but yet you consider yourself *above* them?" Hermione looked to Susan and Ron, "I say we toss him back to the other side and see how long he can fend us off!"

"*Enough!*" Shouted Molly Weasley. "I hear *one more comment* out of *any* of you and they'll be carrying you out on a stretcher!"

The newly arrived Fred and George grinned behind their parents. "She's not kidding, *Malfoy!*" Fred said.

George chimed in. "But we'd *love* to see you cross our mum!"

Molly spun on her heel and almost fell from the pain of a forgotten injury. Fred caught her and helped her to stand. "Thank you, dear." She said, then the anger returned to her face and her voice grew sharp.

"That goes for the both of you, too! Not *ONE MORE WORD!*"

No one spoke.

"Umm..." Arthur stammered, "So... the spell will disarm... him?" From the corner or his eye he saw that many house elves were now strewn on the ground and others were backing off as they grew frightened. They had to act *now*.

"He can still defend himself." Harry interjected, "Just like Professor Dumbledore can."

Dumbledore smiled again. "Just as *you* can, Harry."

"Okay then." Hermione took charge, "Nikolae can signal by telepathy. When we see the..."

"Wedding cake." Nikolae said.

"Right. When we see the image of a wedding cake, cast your spell and *mean it*."

Ron thought a moment. "I think we should make a circle around him. Hit him from all sides."

"That will work nicely, Ronald." Dumbledore agreed, "Exactly what I was thinking."

Harry thought as he walked as well. "After the spell, the rest of you deal with the Death Eaters. Sara, the Headmaster, and I will deal with Voldemort."

"Why do *you* get to chose *who does what*?" Draco asked with a note of sarcasm.

"Just do it!" Hermione shouted.

Arthur cheerfully interjected. "You let us know if you need help, Harry!"

Molly patted Harry's shoulder as they prepared to split up. "That's right, dear! We'll be nearby if you need us."

Harry smiled. "Thanks." There was a brief pause as the Order formed a ring around Voldemort and the Death Eaters and the elves fell back. Ron, Hermione and Sara stopped for one last run-down with Harry. "No one's lost theirs, have they?" Ron asked, talking fast as time had run out.

"Check."

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"Check."

"Check."

"Me too. Check."

Harry glanced at Ron and Hermione. "Be ready. We'll call when it's time."

Without another word they joined the others, circled around Voldemort. Ron was at the far end, closest to the cliffs and Hermione had her back to the west. Sara stood on the cottage side and Harry faced Voldemort with the house behind him. Between these four, who held the crucial positions, was everyone else. The fighting was heavy. The Death Eaters had obviously taken a potion because their strength was unwavering. They also blocked everything that was thrown at them.

These last few stood in a protective circle around their master, who cursed the Order over their heads, so a clear shot at Voldemort was impossible, at least not from all sides. Nikolae had an idea. He cleared his mind, concentrating on the Death Eaters and feeling for their minds. He found them and mentally shouted *DUCK!*

Without fail every one of them ducked and in this fraction of a second, the vampire switched his focus to the Order.

The Order responded as one to the image of a wedding cake with a shouted chorus of angry voices.

"*EXPELLIARMUS!!*"

Voldemort's wand flew from his hand. Sara plucked it from the grass and smiled across at Harry as she slid it into her cloak's always ignored wand pocket. "I finally have a use for this!"

Harry smiled and turned his delighted face to his enemy. "Disarmed by first year magic! You're not as clever as I thought."

Draco, who had ignored his orders and came to stand beside Harry, grinned at Voldemort. "I tried to tell him that yesterday, Potter, but he doesn't listen very well."

Voldemort turned his sinister glare on the traitor. "You'll pay, Draco Malfoy, when all is done. You'll regret the day you were born."

"Whatever!" Malfoy laughed. "One of two sides is walking away tonight and my money's on Potter and these other yahoos."

Harry rolled his eyes, but never took them from his target, even as he addressed Malfoy. "Yahoos? You mean the *red heads* and *Hufflepuffs*?"

"Only a true Slytherin would insult his friends." Voldemort chuckled. "You still belong to me, Draco."

"Friends?" Harry looked surprised and glanced at Malfoy. "Is *that* what you're telling people?"

Draco appeared to be shocked and appalled. "Of course not! He got it in his head some time ago and like I said, you can't tell him *anything*."

Without warning, Voldemort's hand extended like a flash and hurled a curse at an unsuspecting wizard. Dumbledore was knocked to the ground and rolled until he came to a stop supine, gasping, his eyes closed. Harry screamed inwardly, knowing it was his own fault that the Dark Lord had such opportunity. He didn't have time to react as he heard someone bellow a strong blocking charm.

"*REPELLUS!*"

Harry was taken off his feet and was hit by a curse without delay that struck him like a freight train.

Sara threw her lightning and Draco was reciting all the Dark magic he knew it seemed and Snape appeared above Harry with an extended hand. "Get up! NOW!" Harry accepted the hand and was soon on his feet.

"Dumbledore!" he gasped.

"Don't worry, Potter." Snape sneered, "Voldemort saved the Killing Curse for you. I *knew* I'd end up having to save your *meager* life." He hurried away, irritated.

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"Professor!"

Snape looked back.

"Thank you!"

Snape gave a brief nod and Harry swore a small smile touched his lips.

"Potter!" Draco yelled, "Hurry up! I can't move my legs! It *hurts!*"

Harry turned and saw Malfoy on the ground, a creepy black essence winding up his legs like evil spider webs, his brow creased with the effort he made to get up while blocking curses.

"Hermione!" Harry shouted, "Help Malfoy!" Hermione broke away and hurried toward him as Harry did his best to bring harm to Voldemort.

Hermione reversed the damage, knowing exactly what it was on sight. She pulled Malfoy to his feet and Harry grabbed him, whispering in Draco's ear. Draco smiled and set his eyes on Sara.

"Hermione!" Harry yelled when she moved to leave, "Get Ron!"

Sara smiled and pulled Voldemort's wand from her cloak. Harry winked at her as Draco sought out Nikolae, who could relay the rest of the plan to everyone else.

Splash!

Poof!

Only three Death Eaters remained and at last they began to show signs of weariness. Nikolae brought each to the ground in turn by taking their wands in a flash of movement and then drinking just enough of their blood to render them incapacitated, not dead. It was Dumbledore's wish that as many be brought to justice as possible.

At last, those who were still unhurt reformed the ring and aimed their wands, having received their instructions. Voldemort stopped fighting just long enough to see that he was alone and surrounded.

Splash!

Poof!

Voldemort went up in flames.

The wedding cake manifested in each mind and once again there was an eruption of voices. "*Patrificus Totalis!*" Voldemort froze as the fire engulfed his body and shrieked his horror as realization took hold of him.

With wands pointed, Harry and Sara spoke in unison. "*Avada Kedavra!*" Red and gold light issued forth from each wand and entwined the Dark Lord, whose eyes had gone wide with terror. The beautiful song of the phoenix filled the night as the former Tom Riddle collapsed to his knees.

"Get ready!" Harry shouted and Sara drew static from the sky and directed the most powerful bolt of lightning she'd ever attempted. Voldemort exploded in every direction, falling to ashes at their feet.

"NOW!!" Harry bellowed.

"IMMOBULUS!"

The escaping essence of Voldemort arrested mid-air as it tried to take flight and was held there by silver threads of light, tethering him to each wand. All except four.

Harry, Sara, Hermione, and Ron dropped to their knees and pulled the spell books from within their robes and cloaks and tossed them on the ground, planting their right hands firmly on the symbols that adorned the covers. Sara tossed the Orb of Arassel into the center of their square.

"*Celestira!*"

"*Endurius Magi!*"

"*Erudium Intellas!*"

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"*Strategius Jackass!*"

Light in four colors shot forth from each book to mingle together at the junction of the Orb.

"*Reservo Abnocto!*"

The Crux Cube appeared in a fountain of rainbow light, twirling its luminous brilliance, reflecting on the faces of dazzled witches and wizards who still held the essence of the Dark Lord above their heads. The Cube lit up the night as it opened and even its creators looked on in awe. It was pure beauty to behold.

"Lower him!" Hermione yelled and slowly the others brought Voldemort down to the Crux Cube and Harry gave a satisfied smile.

"Let's do it." He said.

"*Clausum Semper!*"

The frozen, silvery cloud that was Voldemort was enveloped by light so pristine, so blinding, it was difficult to watch as the Cube swallowed him. He became smaller as the Cube shone brighter until it closed and he was gone, sealed inside until the day the Crux Cube was opened again. A day they knew would never come.

"*Exitus!*"

The beams of rainbow light retreated to the Orb, then unentwined and faded to their respective book until all was dark again.

Some collapsed to the ground with relief and exhaustion. They had been locked in fierce battle for more than two hours and not one present had an ounce of energy left to call upon, save Nikolae. Despite his fatigue, Draco was so thrilled to be free he couldn't help but get to his feet. He stepped over Harry, who lay in the grass, shedding his cloak with as little effort as possible. Dumbledore had been taken away to the hospital area and was said to be recovering. There was no news on the others. All anyone could do was rest, but Draco had spotted The Tickler, collapsed in the grass where Nikolae had left him. It seemed so few remained that Draco guessed they must have come around enough to return to the catacombs by the Dark Mark.

"Hey!" Draco kicked The Tickler, who lay close to two other Death Eaters. "He's still alive! Can I kill just this one? *Please?* He broke by skull, you know, I owe him a good Killing Curse." He kicked the listless body again.

"Draco *NO!*" Sara screamed "MOVE! MOVE!!"

Draco only looked to her, confused. "Huh?" he said.

At once he was on the ground. Iron hands gripped his ankles and he was powerless. His wand slipped from his fingers as he hit the grass and tumbled out of reach.

Sara's eyes grew wide with acute terror. "*DRACO!!*"

Draco was gone. The ground where there was once three Death Eaters was now saturated with moonlit emptiness. Everyone sat up. All of them saw it.

Harry stared in disbelief. "*Oh my God.*" He whispered.

Sara was crying. She had seen the threat, but too late. Now she could see nothing of her friend. Her heart twisted with agony, knowing she might never see him alive again.

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35. Bittersweet Symphony

"Snake!" Harry rolled onto his knees, "*SNAPE!*"

Severus went up on his elbows in the grass not 15 steps away. "Calm down, Potter, I'm not in France!"

He gestured across the Channel. "What are you *carrying on* about?"

"You've been there! You can take us to get Draco!"

"*That's* your plan? Time is wasting, in case you hadn't noticed!"

"You *know* where they took him and you have the means to take us there! *That's* what I'm saying!"

"The means you speak of don't exist. Access was blocked to me long ago and I *suggest* you take care with *what you say.*"

Harry glanced around and saw that he and Snape held everyone's rapt attention. "You must know the way by broom. You must know *something!*"

"If I did do you think we'd be sitting here right now? Don't be so ignorant." Snape folded his arms across his chest, sitting up fully. No one had the energy to stand.

"Harry," Hermione opined, "I don't think he knows. If he did, don't you think he would have told Dumbledore by now?"

"He is a member of the Order." Ron agreed. "Slytherin or not."

Snape raised an eyebrow at Harry. "Ever get the impression that your friends are *much* more intelligent than you are, Potter?"

Harry narrowed his eyes.

"After all, even Weasley here can put two and two together and he can't even think of the *simplest* spells. It's a wonder you even graduated."

Arthur Weasley, who was a little red in the face, addressed Snape with an edge of irritation. "Now Severus, you know very well that our Ron was Head Boy."

"Stop bickering!" came a familiar voice.

Molly glanced around in bewilderment. "Ginny? Is that you, dear?"

Ginny removed the invisibility cloak and revealed herself, hovering a meter from the ground on the little carpet. She held a metal pail in one hand. "Hello mum."

The Weasleys gasped, but Ginny focused on Harry. "Can't you go ten minutes without starting an argument? Professor Snape may be a *Slytherin*, but he just saved your life, Harry. I saw it. I was about to throw the Swill on Voldemort when he cursed you. You'd be dead if it wasn't for him."

"It was you!" Ron announced, wide eyed. "We couldn't figure it out!"

Seamus lounged on the ground with Fred and George, all of whom were injured, but had returned to the battle regardless. "I knew it!" He grinned, "I know Finnegan's Swill when I smell it!"

Harry grinned as well. "*Brilliant*, Ginny! I'd forgotten all about it!"

Hermione spoke up in disbelief. "You *left* it there?! Harry, I told you not to keep a whole room full of alcohol under your brand new house! Does *no one* listen to me?"

"Um... *sometimes* we do." Ron said with awkward apology. "But I have to agree with Harry, Gin."

Bloody brilliant!"

"Thank Sara. It was her idea, not mine."

Everyone turned to Sara, still on the far side of the gathering, flat out on the grass. The sudden attention did nothing to rouse her.

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Harry grew concerned. "Sara?"

"Huh?" she rolled her head to the side and opened one eye. "Did someone call me?"

"HOLD IT RIGHT THERE!!" Charlie shouted, startling the group, who turned their eyes from Sara to the trespassers at once. Two Death Eaters walked toward the gathering, nervous and reluctant. Their hands went up in surrender and they came to a stop, looking to one another for advice it seemed. The larger of the two untied his mask and the other followed suit.

Harry was shocked. "Crabbe! *Goyle!*"

"Don't kill us!" Crabbe pleaded, "We're not real Death Eaters."

Ron narrowed his eyes with suspicion. "Then how do you explain the masks?" he wondered, "If you're not with Voldemort, then why the bloody hell are you wearing his ridiculous costumes?"

Hermione put her hands on her hips and glared at them. "Like we'd really believe you! Slytherins aren't exactly known for their honesty. I do believe the Sorting Hat said they'll do anything to get what they want."

"*Yeah!*" Seamus interjected, "And you're in a spot, now that your Dark Lord has been *extinguished*, aren't you! Stuck here at Harry's house!"

"*Let them speak!*" Snape bellowed, "And if I hear the name of Slytherin House used as an *insult* one more time you'll all deal with me!"

No one apologized, but it seemed the accused would have their opportunity.

Goyle stuttered as he tried to explain. "Our fathers made us get the Dark Mark. We didn't really care either way at first, but then we saw what happened to Draco."

Crabbe nodded as if to confirm that this was the truth.

"Draco wanted nothing to do with it. We weren't really friends 7th year, but he's still our best mate.

We couldn't stand what Voldemort did to him, so we decided to tell someone who could help him."

"Ah!" came a tired old voice. All heads turned to smile with enormous welcome at the Headmaster, who hobbled along with Nikolae at his side. "I see you have found my informants!"

Harry was thunderstruck. "Your *what?*!"

Ron was incredulous. "*Crabbe and Goyle? Malfoy's baboons* are your informants??"

"Have you forgotten *so soon*, Mr. Weasley, that Draco Malfoy fought at your side tonight?"

Dumbledore gave Ron a stern glance over his spectacles. "I think at this point in time I should share something Harry said this very morning, for it is the simple truth"

Harry closed his eyes and groaned.

"*Not all Slytherins are terrible people.*"

Snape grinned. "Yes, I believe I do recall Potter making that exact statement. In fact it was right after confessing that the Sorting Hat had almost placed *him* in Slytherin House."

"*Shut-up!*" Harry shouted, wishing he'd accidentally killed Snape during the battle.

Dumbledore smiled as he looked around at the astounded faces trained on Harry, who he knew was

quite mortified. Slowly, the smile fell away. "Where is Draco Malfoy?"

* * *

"We only ever went with our fathers." Goyle explained. "Neither one of us knows how to get past the traps, or even where they are or what they do. If you can figure it out, we can lead you through the catacombs. Other than that, we're of little help."

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Harry was growing restless. He'd wanted to jump on his broom the moment Malfoy had disappeared and now the endless bickering and disagreement only pushed his urgency into madness. He'd made a promise to Draco, one he would honor even if it meant losing everything, even his life. He could only hope Draco was still alive. "We'll figure it out when we get there, *let's go!*"

"Harry." Dumbledore sighed, "Whatever Voldemort has blocking our entrance is also blocking the tracking device Draco swallowed. We'll have to lower it to find him. That means we first have to figure out where the catacombs are. The situation looks hopeless, I'm afraid. We've been looking for *many* years."

"*Unacceptable.*" Harry fumed, "I *promised* to get him out of there. You promised, we ALL PROMISED!"

"Calm yourself, Harry. Do you really think we want to lose the very wizard who risked himself to serve our cause? Who faced his greatest fears and delivered Voldemort right into our hands? Draco Malfoy deserves to live through this night more than *any* of us."

Sara, who had not yet moved, tried to climb to her feet. Her exhaustion was obvious as she struggled and swooned and finally managed to get to her knees. "I have to go to the cottage. Someone help me, hurry up!"

Harry rushed to her side. "Sara, you're not well. You need rest, you shouldn't have been fighting."

"Just get me there! Harry, if you want to save Draco then stop arguing with me."

"What do you mean to do?"

"Severus! Come with me. I need your help."

Snape arrived by her side and helped her to stand. He lifted her in his arms and hurried to the cottage without a word to anyone.

Hermione came to stand beside Harry, perplexed. "I wonder what *that's* about."

"I don't know." Harry admitted. "I have no idea."

* * *

"Hold tight to me, Severus."

Snape wrapped his arms around her and she touched the silver serpent she'd touched only once before.

They arrived in the dark study and Snape recognized his surroundings at once.

"My God!" He whispered, "Where did you get that?"

"From Lucius." She admitted, "A very long time ago. Now come. I saw a memory in Draco's mind, a painful one, but I think it could help him now."

Snape helped Sara through the vast house to a corridor on the easternmost side. She stopped before a painting hung with black velvet and touched the fabric. "This is it." She pulled the drape aside and let it fall to the floor. Snape gasped and Sara took a deep breath. "*Hello Lucius.*"

Lucius purred with the sinister, secret amusement she still heard in her darkest dreams. "Well *well*, Miss Lemke. To what do I owe this pleasure? And Severus Snape! *Odd combination.* Though I have to inquire as to why you both look so utterly... *wretched?*"

"It's been a long night." Sara replied.

Snape jumped right in, anxious to deliver the news himself. "As of twenty minutes ago, Voldemort," he said, "has been *exterminated.*"

The shock in Lucius' painted image was profound. "You don't say? That certainly is news, Severus."

How thoughtful of you to come *all the way* to Malfoy Manor just to inform me."

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Sara grew animate. "Lucius... *it's Draco.*" She explained, wringing her trembling hands. "He was taken by Death Eaters to the catacombs and his life is in the gravest danger! They'll kill him!"

Voldemort protected him, but there's no one to protect him now. I saw the vengeful thoughts of the one that grabbed him. I know the evil that fueled his twisted mind. If we don't get to Draco soon there will be no one left to save. It may already be too late."

"*Draco?* You mean the sniveling wretch that came to me with anger and an all too familiar hatred not so long ago? The very same Draco who said he'd *see me in hell?*" Lucius gave a soft, musical laugh.

"Why would you think I even care?"

"We don't have time for games." Sara told the portrait. "Draco is going to die if you don't help him. He's your son! Don't you know that he loved you? He loves you still! Even through the hatred you speak of. If Draco has hatred for you in his heart it's because he wanted you to be so much *more*. It's because you didn't love him in return."

"Enough with the sentimental nonsense, Sara, *touching* as it is." Lucius smiled. "The boy deserves whatever he gets. He was always rather worthless so it's no great loss to anyone, really. He's spineless, a traitor too *weak* to accept his position. A position wizards would *kill* for the world over and it was *handed* to him on a silver platter. He's an embarrassment to his name."

Snape was struck with inspiration. "Speaking of names, Lucius, am I correct in saying that if Draco dies before producing an heir the name Malfoy will cease to exist?"

Sara picked up on the brilliance of this tactic and ran with it. Obviously, striking an emotional chord with Lucius Malfoy was not going to work. "And what do you think would become of this magnificent

house? As Draco's closest friend I would feel obligated to buy it. Perhaps Harry could open a school here? Defense against the Dark Arts. That's his specialty, as you know. Your study would make a *perfect* office for him." She thought about mentioning the fact that Malfoy Manor had been left to Harry in Draco's will, but feared Lucius would condemn Draco for it.

Snape controlled his smile. "He'd want to redecorate, of course. I can't even *imagine* what he'd do with your portrait, Lucius."

"Bathroom." Sara decided and turned serious again. "But, if we were to save him... Lucius, Voldemort is history. You've nothing to lose except your only son."

"Draco *is* my only heir, unfortunately." Lucius sighed. "I suppose you want to know how to get through the wards?"

"You can start with where it is."

* * *

"Come on, Ron." Harry said with his eye on the cottage. "Let's go see what they're up to."

"Don't bother." Dumbledore advised, "You won't find them. They're gone, Harry."

"Gone!" Ron thundered, "At a time like *this*? Where the bloody hell did they *go*?"

Nikolae stepped forward. "Don't worry. Just start working on a plan. She will return with the means to get you there."

"Harry looked surprised. "She will?"

"I know her determination well. She will find a way."

"But how can Sara gain access to Voldemort's lair?"

"Let's just say that Draco's own tortured memories may now save his life."

Hermione lowered her eyes. "He's been gone nearly half an hour. I just hope..."

Arthur got to his feet. "Now we shouldn't be thinking the worst! I'm sure such a *stubborn* young man could..." he trailed off, knowing even he didn't believe what he was saying. It stood to reason that Draco Malfoy was already dead. The knowledge hung in the air like mist.

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Neville and Mary joined the gathering, pale faced and supporting each other. "I've never really cared for Malfoy, personally." Neville said, confused. "And neither have any of you! Why the dark faces? He's not dead is he?"

Hermione became angry. "*No one* who fought on our side deserves to die down there!"

"I don't think he knows." Harry realized, "Neville, Mary." He explained, "Draco went back to Voldemort as a pawn for us. He went willingly and led Voldemort into our trap. He *knew* he was our Trojan horse, but it was a mission he was willing to accept if only to change our *opinion* of him. You see, he was on our side all along. Now the Death Eaters have him and they know he's a traitor."

"Well? What's the plan then?"

Ron took over. "We'll all go inside together, except for Susan, Ginny, Mum and Mary." Everyone had turned their attention to Ron and he glanced around. "You four will stay outside and act as guards. They may be expecting us so don't think you're being left out. Besides," he assured them, "you may have to rescue us." Ron cleared his throat and continued. "Once we're in we go in two groups. One with Crabbe and one with Goyle. According to them there are a few places we might find Malfoy. Harry, Hermione and I will go with Dumbledore to the most obvious places. Dad and Snape will lead everyone else to search the secondary rooms."

Harry took a step forward. "Snape will also need to find their potions lab. There is another matter which needs to be dealt with."

"Very well then." Ron turned to his father, "You will also find the potions lab. Other than that, there is no plan."

"WHAT is going on here?" said a loud, authoritative voice from outside the circle.

All turned to see a large group of aurors gathered behind them.

Hermione pushed her way to the front to address them. "We're running out of time." She said, "We need your help."

* * *

"I won't be going," Sara explained as Snape eased her onto the grass. "I want to, of course, but I think I've overdone it."

"Are you ok, Sara?" Harry asked as he came to sit beside her.

She leaned against him and closed her eyes. "I'm weak is all. I feel dizzy and it's hard to stand. It seems the lightning I threw at Voldemort took more energy than I had left."

Harry pulled her into his lap and cradled her against his chest. "You need to rest."

"I do, Harry." Her blind hand touched his cheek. "In fact, I have no choice in the matter."

Harry looked to Dumbledore. "Someone needs to stay with her."

"No." Sara interrupted, "Everyone must go. I'll rest until you return; you have my word. Christina can look in on me."

Hermione grew concerned. "Nothing against Christina, but what does she know about magical maladies?"

Nikolae came forward. "I also will stay behind. I haven't the ability to fly a broom and there's no guarantee we'll be back by daybreak." He knelt beside Sara. "I will stay with you, Nikita. You will not be alone."

"But you're in your natural form! Christina will see you!"

"I took some hair from a rather attractive young man I found dead not half an hour ago. I will only be hideous for a few more minutes."

Sara opened her eyes and tried to smile. Her fingers brushed the pale skin of his vampire face. Her voice was a whisper, but her words brought a smile to his lips. *"You... are... beautiful, my friend."* *

"Come to me." He whispered and took her from Harry's arms. "The others must be off now." He turned his eyes to Harry. "I will take good care of her."

Harry smiled and handed her over. "I know you will."

"Harry," she said and Nikolae lifted her as Snape had done, "promise me you'll find him. Promise you'll bring him back, no matter what state he's in."

"I intend to do exactly that." He kissed her and smoothed the hair from her face.

"And be careful. Promise you'll return to me."

"I'll see you soon, Sara. We *all* will." He kissed her again and Nikolae carried her off toward the house.

"Are we ready?" Dumbledore inquired.

Harry turned to Snape. "You're *sure* the information you got is correct? How do we know Lucius isn't leading us all to our deaths?"

"Because his name is at stake, Potter. I'm as certain as I could be or else I wouldn't have suggested we follow his instructions, obviously. Now enough ridiculous questions! We need to leave at once!

Enough time has been wasted already!"

Because the ruins Lucius mentioned were in Ireland, it was faster to apparate back to the chamber at Hogwarts and fly from there. The aurors agreed to accompany the Order to the catacombs, but the Gypsies, most of whom had been healed, were returning to Keltse-tia. The house elves had already gone back to Hogwarts, carrying their dead between them with sad, haunted faces.

Harry summoned his broom and everyone clustered close together, linking arms so no one was lost. They disappeared.

* * *

Christina heard someone moving about the house and her heart was struck through with fear. Her terror spiked so that she could barely move as Sara's warning pulsed through her head. *Hide... hide... hide...*

She crawled under the bed and tried not to breath.

Minutes passed. Many it seemed. An eternity later a set of feet appeared in the open doorway.

"Christina." Said a man's voice, "Sara is not well. She requests your presence. Do not fear, dear girl, the battle is over. If I wanted to harm you I would simply draw you out from under the bed."

Christina's breath caught in her throat. He knew where she was and yet caused her no harm. But what if using Sara's name was just a ploy to gain her trust? Draw her out in a sense? She had promised to hide until she was sure it was one of them and she intended to do just that. The feet left the doorway and went back the way they'd come and she sighed with relief. It was then that she heard a voice from within her own mind. A voice both familiar and foreign.

Come out, Christina. I am in my room. There is something you need to know.

"What?" Christina whispered, frightened by the phantom voice in her head. So real, as if Sara was right beside her, whispering in her ear.

The man you saw is my friend. You are safe now. Come out. Come to me.

Christina crawled out from under the bed, confused, but no more so than she had been while looking out the window. *Nothing* here made sense. She decided to play along, fueled by curiosity.

She went to the loft Sara shared with Harry in the little tower above their sitting room. The windows were open when she arrived and the salty breeze tickled the curtains as the surf crashed far below.

Sara was in bed, asleep it seemed, and a handsome young man sat by her side. He glanced up at Christina and nodded his welcome.

Sara spoke, soft and quiet, but did not open her eyes. "Draco is in trouble, Christina. They've all gone after him, but you need to understand that he may not be ok."

"What do you mean? Sara, *what's happened to Draco?*"

"He's in the wrong hands." She said, her tired voice heavy with approaching sleep. "I fear the worst."

Silent tears slipped from Sara's eyes and she drifted off. Christina wiped her own face and sniffled, trying to hold back a flood of emotion. The quiet young man handed her a linen handkerchief and she took it with gratitude. "Is she alright?" she whispered.

"Sleep is all she needs."

"Is she asleep now?"

Nikolae closed his eyes for a moment and then reopened them. "Yes."

"What is she? She's different from the rest of them. So are you, actually. But there is something about Sara that is ethereal. Something that affects a person on a deeper level and draws them to her.

Something radiates from this girl, sir, and it isn't all good. As easy as it is to smile in her presence, her pain can wrap around your very bones so that you feel it completely."

"I know the feeling you describe."

"Yesterday I was on my way to the solarium and was passing through the back lobby, where the marble terrace is? I can't describe the way I was overcome as I stopped just inside the archway. She was playing the piano and singing some bittersweet love song my mum used to listen to. It was like I was actually *feeling* the music. "I can't explain it, but it was beautiful, really. It was *moving*."

"Yes, Sara's voice is haunting, I agree. You are not the first person to describe it that way."

"I have seen her on the cliffs at night. Just standing there, a lovely figure in the moonlight, seeming to play with the wind. She raises her arms and it lifts her cloak and sometimes it appears to swirl around

her like a playful embrace. And look at her, she's *flawless!* No one is that good looking."

"Sara is *not* flawless."

"She's probably the most beautiful person I've ever seen to be honest. She positively *captivates* me. I can't explain the affect she has on people."

"I have seen it first hand. Sara is magnetic when she walks into a room, no matter *what* mood she's in." He gave her a gentle smile. "She's quite a bit like your Draco in those regards."

"He's just a friend." She sniffled, the dread flaring up in her stomach.

"I know what your rational mind expects, but I can see farther than that."

Christina smiled and dabbed at her eyes. "It was at his house that I met Sara. I wish I could describe the way she commanded the very air I breathed with her presence. There was nothing in that room as far as I'm concerned, except her. I could look at nothing else and when she pushed back her hood it was all I could do not to drop the pipe I was holding. I thought she was an *angel* or something and it scared the hell out of me. The way she attracted the moonlight was fascinating. She almost *glowed* in the darkness and her voice was dreamlike. I thought I was sleeping." Christina turned her eyes to Sara's peaceful face. "There is something otherworldly about this girl. She can't possibly be a human being."

"She is."

"Not like one I've ever seen."

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"I *know* what you've seen tonight, Christina. I will ask you now not to relate that knowledge to anyone except Draco and myself. You can be trusted with it, I see."

"Explain it to me then! If I'm so trustworthy then tell me the truth! What are you? What is she? What are *they*?"

"Calm yourself."

"I'm sorry. I need to know."

"And you will in time." Nikolae said and stood. "It will be a little while before we learn of Draco's fate. I will prepare us some tea."

Christina nodded, understanding that the topic was closed. With the young man gone, she took Sara's hand and watched her sleeping face, perfect in the light of a single candle. "*What are you?*" she whispered.

The reply resonated through her mind like an echo.

The Elemental.

* * *

"Come on!" Goyle whispered, looking around a corner. "This way!"

It was clear that they were on the right path. The echoes of argument drifted through the catacombs and they were heading straight for it.

"Be quiet!" he warned as they rounded another corner and the shouting grew louder. "This way! Don't let them hear you."

Harry's heart beat wildly in his chest, knowing they could be attacked at any second. The Death Eaters were very near and his little group had come quite close to the room they occupied. He wondered how much further before they reached what Goyle referred to as the training room. They had already looked in several places, the very cell Draco had described among them. Everything was exactly as he'd said it was and Harry's mouth went dry when they approached their destination. Harry knew all too well what happened in *there*.

Goyle opened the door and casually walked in, still wearing his Death Eater garb without the mask.

"*Draco!*" He said and Dumbledore gave the aurors a signal. The now familiar sound of fighting erupted down the hall and everyone filed into the room. Ron shut the door and leaned against it with his wand poised and ready.

"Oh no!" Hermione gasped.

Draco was pale, white as winter snow, and his head lay in a pool of blood. His eyes were glassy slits and his jaw hung askew as if it was broken. Hermione noticed the just emerging bruises down the left side of his face and assumed that it probably was. There was no mistaking the fractures in his arms and legs and she closed her eyes to the sight, wishing they'd been able to save him. Even Malfoy, she thought, deserved something better than this.

"*Bugger.*" Ron said, "They busted him up pretty good."

Harry didn't respond. He stood at Malfoy's feet, looking down on the body with a thousand years worth of guilt in his eyes.

"Harry." Dumbledore place a steadying hand on Harry's shoulder. "Don't blame yourself. Draco knew the risks better than either of us."

Hermione took his hand. "That's right, Harry. You told me he wrote out his will before he went. He knew this might happen."

Ron sighed. "I hate to say it, mate, but we couldn't have defeated Voldemort without him. He saved us *all* in a sense."

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"Harry." Dumbledore said, "This boy is a hero, more so than any of us on this night. He did not die in vain."

Harry said nothing; his eyes were on Draco's pale face, surrounded by a crimson halo. Harry knelt beside him as Hermione, Ron and Dumbledore discussed how best to remove Draco from the catacombs. There was a faint reddish glow from beneath his shirt and Harry pulled the fabric aside.

He'd forgotten about Sara's Amidon, so similar to the Amoridon he wore around his own neck. The charm Malfoy wore was alight and warm to the touch, comforting even to look at. Harry smiled and looked to Dumbledore. *"He's not dead!"*

* * *

"It's right through here." Crabbe whispered as their larger group crept through the mossy halls, some opening doors as they made their way along. "Professor! It's in here."

Snape stormed the room with his wand held out before him and the others were quick to follow. The room was deserted. The potion he searched for was on a table at the far side and Snape went forward with trepidation. A cloud of reddish-black smoke hung in the air above it and he commanded everyone else to stay back as he approached. A scene flickered in and out, being swallowed by the cloud of smoke only to re-emerge as something else. Sara sleeping, then images of a wedding dress, Keltse-tia, and Draco in a dream-like state. These were Sara's unconscious thoughts. Then another image surfaced and Snape looked closer as Potter knelt beside Draco, who was badly injured, and pulled aside Draco's shirt. "They've found him!" Snape announced with delight, "He's alive!"

The faces around him erupted with smiles and Snape pointed his wand at the cauldron. *"Philtrum Concludo!"*

The cloud dispersed into the air, Snape dumped the cauldron and then erased the contents with a flick of his wand. "Alright, let's get in position. They'll be bringing him out soon. I think it wise to clear a path for them."

* * *

Sara opened her eyes with a breathless gasp and Christina and Nikolae turned to her at once. Nikolae brushed her hair back from her face. "What is it, Nikita?"

"They found the potion." She whispered. "The feeling is gone."

"Then it has been destroyed."

"Yes."

"Go back to sleep, my dear." he smoothed her brow, "You're to be married tomorrow. You've a long day ahead."

Sara closed her eyes and drifted off again.

* * *

St. Mungo's was quiet this time of night and Harry sat beside the bed with his head in his hands and his eyes on Draco. No one was sure when he would wake. The skull fracture he'd sustained was serious and it was still in the process of healing. In fact, there was so much wrong with him that the head Medi-wizard had been awakened and called to the hospital to examine Draco personally. It was his opinion that healing everything at once would send Malfoy even further into shock so it was to be done in stages throughout the night. He had also determined that Draco had already sustained a similar head injury that had been very recently healed with magic. On top of that, he also had 17 broken bones in his face and body, damage to his left lung and internal bleeding. It was said that the Order had found him just in time.

Malfoy's last words echoed through Harry's head. *"Can't I kill just this one? Please? He broke my skull, you know..."*

"If I find him, Draco," Harry whispered, "I'll kill him for you."

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"No you won't, Harry." Dumbledore sighed and took a seat on the other side of the bed. "Once Mr. Malfoy awakens and can identify his attackers, then attempted murder charges will be added to their lists of crimes. With every Death Eater now in the aurors' custody, he needs only point them out. You won't be killing anybody unless you care to join them in Azkaban."

"It doesn't seem right, sir. Azkaban is *nothing* compared to what they've done."

"Obviously, you've never been to Azkaban. It's been described as worse than death by many. Trust me when I say it's a just punishment."

Harry said nothing in reply, just watched Draco sleep.

"Go home, Harry. We don't want you falling asleep at the altar."

"I want to stay just a little longer, Professor. It's late. You should get back to Hogwarts." He gave Dumbledore a tired smile, "We don't want you falling asleep at the altar, either."

"At this hour, Harry, that is a becoming a real possibility."

"Goodnight, sir. I'll see you in the morning."

"Goodnight, Harry."

* * *

Nikolae was gone when Sara awoke to the first light of dawn, feeling refreshed and whole once again. She was achy, but nothing a little potion couldn't fix. Beside the bed was a folded note with the word *Nikita* inscribed upon it in the flawless, slanted script of yesteryear. *Perhaps*, she thought, *it was news of Draco*. Sara opened it with shaking hands.

My Dearest Nikita,

It is my sincere pleasure to inform you that Draco Malfoy was found by the Order and is recovering from his injuries at St. Mungo's Hospital. Albus stopped here during the night to inquire after you and explained that Draco has not yet regained consciousness, but his condition is now stable. Harry remained by his side and has yet to return as daybreak approaches. Christina fell asleep while watching over you and I carried her to her room.

Good luck today, my dear. I only wish I could be there to witness this long awaited occasion. I will see you at dusk.

Nikolae

With a weepy smile, Sara dressed quickly and took the Firebolt to the cottage. Now that the foreign feelings for Draco had left her, there was something she had to do and it couldn't wait. Standing just inside the doorway, she opened the little gold box and touched the key with broom in hand. Her old tower rooms looked exactly as they had the day before, but it was Sara herself who had changed and she looked on them now with a new perspective. The tower had not been her prison; it held the best years of her life and the very last of her adolescence. She longed to sleep here with the wind drifting in through the windows and Harry slipping in from the stairs under the invisibility cloak and wearing silly cotton pajamas.

She smiled with all the wonderful memories the tower held and cried for innocence lost within these walls. It seemed a threat always lingered in one form or another and whether it be the dark shadow of Voldemort or the Raven, their lives had melded and shattered in these very rooms because of it. They were barely more than children then, sixteen and full of the excitement of life and fascinated by the mystery of each other. She'd lived and breathed for Harry Potter then, her every thought was of him as she'd anticipated the night, ever wondering what new thrill would come with the light of the moon.

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As Sara passed through the door to the stairs she glanced back one last time and smiled with renewed warmth. She *still* lived and breathed for Harry Potter. Life held different challenges now, but to be together was no less exciting and it seemed they could go on being fascinated by the mystery of each other forever. And they were children no longer.

* * *

The room swam in, then out again and Draco closed his eyes. A moment later he reopened them to find things a little steadier. Strange gadgets beeped and clicked all around him and it made his head hurt, but he soon tuned them out, only to be left with the sounds of soft snoring. There was no other bed in the room that he could see. It hurt to move, but Draco finally managed to turn on his side. He smiled when he saw Harry sitting in a chair with his head atop his folded arms, resting on the edge of the bed, his glasses toppled off onto the blankets. Draco gave his sleeping friend a pained smile and whispered so that Harry could not hear. "*You kept your promise, Potter.*"

"Well well!" Came a jolly old fat doctor, waddling through the door with dull, tired eyes, "You're awake!"

"Be quiet!" Draco scolded in a whisper, "If you wake him up I'll kill you."

Harry awoke at Malfoy's voice, but remained where he was, eavesdropping.

"Kill me, you say?" the doctor chuckled, "Dumbledore said you'd be a handful."

Harry almost burst out laughing, but continued his façade of sleep.

"What does that old goat know! Why does it hurt to talk!"

"Because, young man, your jaw was broken in three places. How does the rest of you feel?"

"My chest hurts. My arms and legs ache. Is my head still broken?"

"Your lung was punctured in nine places thanks to six shattered ribs. Your arms and legs all had compound fractures. Your liver and spleen were ruptured. As for your head, it's mostly healed, but I have to say, I've never seen a mess like that on a living person. It looked like you'd been hit by a speeding train."

"It was a mace." Draco explained, "You know? Like the queen's knights used to clobber people with?"

The doctor stopped, dumbstruck. "And you *survived*? You must be mistaken! No one would have lived through such a thing!"

"Well, not everyone's a *Malfoy*. We're stronger than ordinary people. At least that's what my father always said."

"*Malfoy or not*, you're lucky to be alive. I can't explain it. Every specialist in England has had a look at your films. Now here you are, not six hours later, not just *alive* but *sarcastic*!" The jolly doctor gave a fat bellied laugh. "All we can figure is that it had something to do with that charm you have on. My associates wanted to examine it, but Mr. Potter and I thought it best left around your neck."

"The Amidon!"

"Is *that* what it's called?" The doctor started scribbling on a scroll with a well-worn feather quill.

"It was a gift." Draco said, clutching it, "Sara gave it to me."

"Your girlfriend?"

"No *you idiot*, Potter's fiancé! The Elemental?"

"I see. And what exactly does it do?"

"It's the essence of her friendship, why?"

"Because it was glowing bright red when you came in and it was almost hot to the touch. I can't be certain, but I think it had something to do with the fact that you're still with us this morning."

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Draco coughed and his lungs burned like liquid fire. He screamed in pain and startled Harry so badly he sat bolt upright and toppled the chair backward onto the floor. Draco was so amused by this that his agony was forgotten and he laughed as best he could.

"Morning, Potter. First time using a chair?"

* * *

She was nervous, terrified actually, when she stepped into the Headmaster's office. Sara held her breath as the portraits awoke and she took the Hat from its shelf.

"*PUT THAT DOWN!*" An old woman screeched with her hands flat against her cheeks in worry.

"It's *her* again! The mad Slytherin!"

"Dumbledore!" A bearded man bellowed, "DUMBLEDORE!!!"

"Oh shut up!" Sara shouted. "I'm not *mad*, I was upset! How would you like being named as a Slytherin??"

"One house is as good as another, young lady!"

"I beg to differ." said a man with enormous sideburns, "She does have a valid point!"

The Hat seemed to look up at Sara. "Need your house re-affirmed, do you?"

"Yes." She whispered, "I'm not the same person I was yesterday. At least I don't think I am."

"Then perhaps you should put me on. Let me be the judge of that!"

Sara took a deep breath and pulled the Sorting Hat onto her head. The portraits gave a collective gasp and then waited in silence to hear what it would say.

A Ravenclaw you still could be,

Intelligence and intellect you bear.

A Hufflepuff I also see,

A mix of many traits are there.

The other two houses divide thee

Which? Why should you care?

Are you still a Slytherin?

Let me look once more!

Overnight you've changed your ways

And now belong in Gryffindor!

"Now what did I tell you, Sara?"

She spun on her heel and smiled wide for her Uncle Albus. "You were right! I'm *not* a Slytherin!" She pulled the Hat from her head, gave it a loud kiss, and placed it back on its shelf.

"The portraits are right, you know. You're still you, no matter what house you're in."

"Maybe, Uncle, but certain people belong in certain houses. I don't want to be one of *those*, if you know what I mean."

"Isn't one of your closest friends descended from a long line of Slytherins?"

"Draco is special, you know that. He is a Slytherin no doubt, but he has a conscience. He hates every minute of it, but it's there. His bark is worse than his bite as the old saying goes."

"He has turned out rather well, to my surprise. To *everyone's* surprise actually, and I rather enjoy his abrasive sense of humor. The boy is quite amusing in spite of himself."

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Sara smiled. "I always thought it was impossible to be bored while in his presence and I stand by that to this day. How is he? Have you heard anything more?"

"Come to the great hall, I'll tell you over breakfast. His doctor is so amazed he hasn't slept a wink all night!"

* * *

At nine AM sharp Harry entered the Ministry of Magic and encountered everyone else from the Order gathered in the atrium, wondering what the meeting was about. Everyone held an official letter, but no one seemed to understand, least of all Harry. Ron and Hermione came through right behind him.

Harry spotted Seamus and Neville with the girls and meant to make his way across the room, but at that moment a smug, lanky witch came into the archway and asked that they follow her. A quick count showed that only 22 members were present, 11 short of everyone. Harry swallowed hard and fell in.

After many lifts, halls, stairs, twist, turns, and doors, the group was led into a vast chamber where an enormous table sat in a tight horseshoe with enough chairs for them to each sit facing the high court.

In the center of this table sat Dumbledore, Snape, and Sara, who beckoned to her group of friends to take seats beside her. Harry took her hand as soon as his knees were under the table.

"You look better." He whispered, "How do you feel?"

"I feel fantastic! I'm a Gryffindor, Harry! It was the potion, just like Uncle Albus said!"

"The Sorting Hat put you in Gryffindor?"

"Yes! I went as soon as I woke up. I had to know before I married you."

"It's so close, Sara! Only eight hours until you're Mrs. Potter!"

"Why can't it be sooner?" She sighed and leaned her head on his shoulder. "I wish it was only eight minutes!"

"Attention!" Spoke a stout wizard Harry recognized as Julian Smigeon, the newly appointed Minister of Magic. "I realize that a wedding is taking place today, so let's make this as brief as possible."

Seamus grinned. "I second the motion!"

Fred and George rose and sat again in quick succession.

"Third!"

"Fourth!"

"Children!" Arthur scolded, "The sooner Mr. Smidgeon begins, the quicker you can leave!"

Smigeon cleared his throat. "Thank you, Arthur. Now, you all know the reason you're here."

Harry interrupted. "Excuse me, sir, but we're *not* all here."

"Yes, yes, I was just getting to that. Where is..." He checked a scroll and then rolled it back up as nine others looked on from their high seats above the court. "*Nikolae*. No last name listed."

Ron snickered. "He's in his coffin, of course! It's full day outside, you know."

Dumbledore cleared his throat and Ron straightened up, the humor dropping from his expression.

"Nikolae is a cognizant vampire, Julian, and one who suffered greatly for our cause. He took the form of my niece, Sara, and let Voldemort's followers shoot him with muggle weapons in her place."

Molly interjected. "Don't forget that he saved every last one of us from those feral vampires

Voldemort tried to attack us with!"

Dumbledore gave a proud smile. "Yes, he did that as well. I suppose I could arrange for you to speak to him after sundown one night this week if you require."

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"V- va- vampire? Um... no... um, I think your word on his actions will suffice, Albus. Now, it has been reported to me that you have eleven wounded, five mortally I'm afraid." Out came the scroll again. "The dead include Alastor Moody, auror. Kingsley Shacklebolt. Dedalus Diggle. Elphias Doge, and Nymphadora Tonks."

Gasps of shock and despair were heard around the room and Harry's own heart twisted when he heard Tonk's name.

"Of the other six that were injured, some are quite serious, but all are said to be recovering. These six will be questioned at a later date."

Harry stood. "Seven."

"Excuse me Mr. Potter?"

"You said six, but there are seven."

"How do you figure?" Smidgeon rattled off the list of names with great impatience.

"Draco Malfoy is also injured."

Smidgeon gave an amused laugh that was echoed from the high bench.

Dumbledore rose to his feet and his anger resonated. "*How dare you laugh at the name of our greatest ally!*" Dumbledore was so angry that all present shrank in fear of him, except for the few who gave the Minister a furious glare. "You owe your freedom from the tyranny of Lord Voldemort to *one person*, Julian, and that person is Draco Malfoy!"

The inquisition went on for an hour. Everyone talked, there was nothing left unexplained. Snippets of this and that story were tossed about.

Malfoy tricked Voldemort... Death Eaters were everywhere... Sara got scared and Harry knew... but Sara was dead...Dumbledore called in St. Mungo's... Sara was under an invisibility cloak and rolled static through the Death Eaters... guns exploded... Draco let Nikolae drink his blood... outnumbered three to one... Ginny had the cloak and was flying around dumping Finnegan's Swill on their heads... we were losing... Nikolae called the Gypsies... Nikolae turned the ferrets on the Death Eaters... spells were reversed... we were losing... the Gypsies were falling... House elves attacked... Dobby led the battle while the Order regrouped... he cursed Dumbledore... tried to kill Harry... Snape blocked the Unforgivable Curse... put the Creeping Death on Draco... disarmed the Dark Lord... Sara took his wand...Ginny doused Voldemort... Phoenix song... Killing Curse...huge blast of lightning... Death Eaters pretending to sleep... grabbed Draco and disappeared... Lucius Malfoy's portrait... Snape got us past the traps... the catacombs were nearly empty...the tracking device was blocked... aurors arrested the stragglers... Draco was dead... the Amidon was glowing... Sara was weak because she was saving his life... head smashed in with a mace... miracle he's alive...

"I think we've heard enough." Smidgeon said, his voice low and humbled. The others on the bench were silent. "The only thing I haven't understood is what happened to Voldemort? Where is his body?"

No one spoke. Not one person present would reveal that the essence of the Dark Lord lived on in the Crux Cube, hidden within the Gryffindor Ka-tet.

Finally, Dumbledore spoke. "He's dead. We told you, he was set ablaze, hit with the killing curse between two twin wands, and struck by lightning. You might find a few of his ashes on Harry and Sara's lawn, but that, I'm happy to say, is all that remains of Lord Voldemort."

"And where was..." he checked the scroll again, "Minerva McGonagall while all this was taking place?"

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Dumbledore smiled. "Now Julian, do you really think I would leave Hogwarts unguarded? Minerva hasn't been the same since she was cursed by Ministry officials several years ago. I thought it best that her skills be put to another use."

"Very well. You may go now, but I want you all back here on Saturday evening at seven. It seems some honors are in order. Dress formal. Dinner will be served promptly at seven-thirty."

Dumbledore expressed that they would all be present.

"Oh and make sure the Malfoy boy is with you, as well as the vampire if you think it's safe."

"I will pass on the invitation."

"See you at the reception, then!" Smidgeon smiled and watched them file out.

* * *

"It's really much nicer having it here at the house." Susan decided as she helped Hermione and Mary arrange Sara's veil. "Now we don't have to switch locations for the reception."

"I agree." Hermione said, "We couldn't have taken Christina to Hogwarts and I can't imagine leaving her all alone here to miss the wedding."

"She seems like such a nice girl." Mary straightened a hem, "Why's she hanging out with Malfoy?"

"Really!" Susan agreed, "Regardless of what he did for the Order, he's so *repellant!*"

Sara finally spoke up. "He may be to some people, but I for one have never seen that side of him. Not really. Perhaps Christina sees what I've always seen in Draco. He's charming and nice and he's a wonderful friend."

All three girls burst into laughter.

Sara grinned, "What's so funny?"

Susan smiled. "So it has *nothing* to do with the fact that he's totally hot?"

Now Sara laughed, too. "Would you look at me? I'm wearing a wedding dress! I'm not thinking about Draco's *appearance!*"

"You can tell us," Mary goaded, "just us girls."

"Tell you what?"

Susan swallowed her giggles. "If you and Malfoy ever-"

"NO!!"

Hermione lowered her head to hide her amusement.

"I would have," Susan admitted, "If I could keep from killing him, that is."

"Not me," Mary grew shy, "He scares me."

Sara turned from the mirror before the conversation progressed and went to the window, peaking around the curtains. "Hey!" She smiled, "There are the guys! How *nice* they look! Ron looks so dashing in a tux, Herms! Seamus and Neville look so elegant escorting people to their seats!"

"And there's your Harry," Hermione smiled, "He cut his hair! He looks exactly like he did in school! He hasn't aged a day!"

"Yes," Sara sighed, "He wanted to look *proper* or so he told me. Personally, I rather liked it long, but he does look good, doesn't he?"

Susan nudged Mary aside so they could both see out. "I've never seen Harry so happy."

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Mary nodded her head. "Of course not, Suze. On this day there is nothing wrong with the world in Harry's eyes. Voldemort is gone. The Death Eaters are all in Azkaban, everyone he loves is arriving at his beautiful new home and the girl he's been waiting for is about to become his wife. He's never had reason to be so happy until now."

A moment passed where no one spoke. They watched the Dursleys arrive and take seats in the front row beside Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. (The rest of the Weasleys took up the next three rows.) The wedding was small and held in the courtyard amid the lilacs and roses. Sara thought there was no more proper setting.

"Ok," Hermione said and led Sara from the window, "One last detail."

She brought the Fortifucus Charm, now on a thin strand of pearls, and clasped it around Sara's neck.

Sara turned to admire the affect in the mirror and smiled at what she saw. "So this is it, then? It's time?"

"Almost."

"Why am I so nervous? It's just Harry. I've been waiting for this moment for so long, and now, I suddenly feel like I'm going to faint from nerves alone!"

Mary smiled and smoothed the light, soft fabric of Sara's dress. "Don't worry. It's normal. You'll be fine. We're your best friends and we'll be right there beside you. *All* of us."

Sara tried to smile, but there was one best friend whose absence she felt like an ache. Draco was still at St. Mungo's, his doctor having refused to release him.

McGonagall rushed into the doorway with her hair pulled back in a soft, elegant bun. "Girls, the guests have all arrived. We're ready for you now." She smiled at Sara, "How lovely you look, dear!"

"Thanks." Sara took a slow, nervous breath. "Be right there."

* * *

"Wait!" Christina called in a loud whisper as the door to the courtyard was about to be opened. Snape stood with Sara on his arm and the other three girls lined up ahead of them. Everyone turned to look at Christina, surprised. "Don't go in yet!"

Sara was annoyed by the sudden disruption and wondered why Christina wasn't in her seat. "What is it?"

"Just wait."

Christina ran back around the corner and appeared again minutes later leading Draco, who took a slow and deliberate pace. He had faded bruises on his face and winced when he stepped on the left leg, but his eyes were lively. He looked only at Sara and gave her a brilliant smile. "Just as I've always imagined it," he said. "You look *perfect*."

Sara wanted to say so many things at once. She was so glad he was ok, and that he'd been able to make it to the wedding. She wanted to thank him for the compliment and acknowledge the fact that he had imagined her in a wedding dress. She said nothing.

There had been something between Draco and herself since the night they'd met. Something that had endured through all of the divergence their friendship had faced. That something ended on this day and there was a bittersweet sadness in his words that matched the mood of her heart as her arms went around him. "Thank God you're here." She sighed as he kissed her cheek. "Your absence was heartbreaking."

"My doctor had a fit." He smiled, "But I wasn't missing it. I had to see you marry that idiot Potter for myself. I never would have believed it otherwise."

Sara laughed and so did he. "Go on and gets seats. I'll be right behind you."

Draco ran a finger over the smooth glassy surface of the Fortifucus Charm and she touched the Amidon around his neck.

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He kissed her face again and took a step back. "Congratulations, Sara. You finally got what you wanted."

She smiled as she watched him go through the door with Cristina beside him and understood another chapter of her life had closed.

* * *

As Severus escorted Sara down the aisle, Draco was in her head, singing along with the violins.

Dumb DUMB-dumb-dumb...dumb DUMB dumb-dumb!

Shut up! She thought in reply, *You're going to make me laugh!*

Draco behaved all through Dumbledore's opening statements. Sara gave a sigh of relief, hoping he would keep quiet through the vows, but her luck had run out. Harry was reciting his when Draco's voice echoed through her head again.

What an idiot! Did he make that up himself? What a sap!

Shut up!

"...until death do us part."

Loser! Look at that haircut!

Shut up!

Sara tried hard to keep a straight face as she recited her vows and Draco mocked her silently. She was glad he'd lived because she was going to *kill* him! "...in sickness and in health...."

In ugliness and idiocy...

"I do."

Run! Fire! Fire! You can still get out of it, I'll cover for you! Just...FAINT!

Sara glanced at Draco who sat, nonchalant, with a hint of a grin of his face.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife."

I now pronounce you a couple of boring people.

Sara gritted her teeth to keep from laughing.

"I am honored to say, Harry, that you may kiss the bride." Dumbledore said, jubilant that the two people he cared most about had finally done what he knew would make them happiest. The years of heartache and misery were over at long last.

Harry's eyes smiled as he looked at Sara and hers filled with unshed tears as he kissed his wife for the first time. The small audience applauded and many cried at the beauty of it all, and with the knowledge of the tragic romance that had led to this very moment. Hagrid blew his nose, McGonagall was sniffing, and Molly Weasley was full out sobbing as she smiled upon the happy couple, who turned to beam at their friends. Harry looked to his Aunt Petunia, who gave him an accepting nod and tried to smile.

Harry turned his gaze back to Sara. "Shall we, Mrs. Potter?"

Sara took the proffered arm. "Yes, Mr. Potter, I believe we shall."

They burst into fresh giggles and walked back down the aisle with all their friends following their lead. As they passed, Sara heard Draco's voice in her mind.

How could you marry a moron?

Sara burst out laughing and Draco gave her an amused smirk.

Shut up! She said, *No one knows why I'm laughing! You'll make me look foolish!*

Oh and you don't look foolish marrying a moron?

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She laughed even harder and turned to face him, unable to pretend she was laughing at nothing in particular. Even Harry was giving her confused glances.

"Shut up, *Malfoy!*" She giggled, "You're terrible!"

Draco looked around like he had no idea what she was talking about. "Huh? Whatever do you mean?"

He projected innocence better than any actor.

"You *know* what I mean! It's not fair, so stop it!"

"Potter," Draco grinned, "Your wife is nuts."

Harry grinned right back. "*Shove off, Malfoy.*"

* * *

"Sara dear, it's a *lovely* party!"

"Thank you!" She smiled and turned to Harry as they headed for more champagne. "Who the hell was that?"

"I don't know. Probably someone's wife."

"Did we invite all of Great Brittan? Is the Queen here?"

"I think I saw her doing a waltz with Neville."

Sara laughed at his jest. "Can you believe this, Harry?" she asked and took the glass he offered, "We're *married*. You're my husband. It doesn't seem real."

"I know what you mean, Mrs. Potter." He said and took a drink, "When you dream of something for so long, want it so much, it's hard to believe when it's suddenly handed to you."

"Exactly."

"Now do I have your word that I'm not going to wake up in the morning and find a note and the luggage missing?" Harry smiled, but was only half kidding. It was still a fear he held in his darkest heart. One he thought he might never get over.

Sara felt his unease and touched her hand to his cheek. "Look at me." She whispered. "I will never leave you. I promise."

Harry smiled and led Sara across the atrium in her beautiful white gown, greeting those they passed and stopping every few feet for photographs. "Sara, look!" Harry smiled, gesturing with his champagne at the dancing in the center of the floor.

Sara saw and a warm smile bloomed on her face as Draco danced close with Christina. While they watched he kissed her, lost to the room. "They make a lovely couple."

"They do." Harry sighed, "They look like us in reverse."

Sara chuckled as she noticed the similarity. Christina's hair was the same color as Harry's, thick and soft. She had the same complexion. The only difference was her brown eyes. Draco, Sara knew,

looked like her own twin brother except her eyes were violet and his were ice blue. "It's strange, Harry, but I think Draco was meant to find her. He's so *lost*, you know."

"So is she."

Sara said nothing more as she watched them dance, barely moving due to Draco's injuries, and something inside her smiled. She loved Draco. She'd only ever wanted his happiness. Nothing more.

"Sara?"

"Yes?"

"I wanted to be the first one to tell you." Harry smiled, "Your black streak is gone."

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THE END

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36. Epilogue: What's in a Name

There was a loud murmur as the Order settled back into their seats after receiving their Medals of Outstanding Service from the Ministry. Once quiet ensued Julian Smigeon cleared his throat and held aloft another medal, a higher honor.

"For bravery above and beyond the call of duty, the Medal of Valor goes to the following. When your name is called, please come forward." He cleared his throat again as the huge gathering of wizards turned their attention from their drinks and desserts once more. "*Sara Potter.*"

Harry and Sara grinned at each other with delight at the use of her new name and he squeezed her hand as she left her seat.

"Sara, this medal is given for your ingenuity, resourcefulness, and also for endangering your own life to save another when all threat to you had been vanquished. It is said that without your unique abilities and your brilliance in planning, the attack on the Dark Lord would have failed and Draco Malfoy would have succumbed to his injuries. I award you the Medal of Valor." He removed the Medal of Outstanding Service and replaced it with a new one.

"Thank you, Minister." Sara said and gave him a humble smile.

"No, thank *you*, my dear. And congratulations on your wedding. You looked stunning if I may say so."

Sara blushed, nodded her thanks, and returned to her seat feeling suddenly shy.

"*Dobby the House Elf.*"

Dobby approached the podium, visibly nervous, with his ears flat and his big eyes shooting around the room. He went down on his knees at the Smigeon's feet and looked at the floor.

"Stand up, Dobby."

Dobby stood as he was told.

Smidgeon got down on his knees. "Dobby, this medal is given for the simple fact that you took it upon yourself, a free servant, to mount an army and attack a foe even I would hesitate to face. No one asked you to, no one ordered you to engage in a battle with wizards. I have never seen such integrity in a house elf and I doubt anyone else has, either. It is said that without you and your army, the battle against the Dark Lord was already lost. You are a role model for elves everywhere, Dobby, and an asset to Hogwarts. I award you the Medal of Valor."

"Thank you, Sir!" Dobby squealed, "Dobby loves living at Hogwarts!"

Dumbledore spoke from his seat. "And let it be known, Dobby, that you may remain there as long as you wish."

Dobby returned to his seat and showed his medal to Winky.

"And now," Smigeon spoke with importance, "for unfathomable courage, self-sacrifice, and something quite beyond valor, I award the Minister's Medal of Heroism to... I have to admit, I'm a bit nervous about this, as well-deserved as it is. *The Vampire Nikolae.*"

Nikolae, having found new hairs for his polyjuice which he claimed provided a resemblance close to his own, proceeded to the podium. The Minister's voice had grown shaky with the fear Nikolae's presence prompted in mortals and he shrunk away.

"Please." Nikolae said with his calm, soothing voice and his gentle manner. "I will not harm you." He put out his hand and Smigeon shook it with frightened hesitance.

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"Forgive me, sir." Smigeon said, regaining his composure, "Your actions do not warrant such a reception." He cleared his throat. "This medal is given for your selfless acts, your willingness to compromise yourself for the sake of others and your service to a race that has nothing to do with your own. You did not have to do what you did, but you allowed yourself to be harmed, suffered great pain, and from what I understand, may have laid there in agony for days without help. You turned a threat to the advantage of the Order, a threat that would have been the end of them without doubt. And I hear you even wore a dress for the occasion." Smigeon smiled and there was a rupture of laughter through the crowd. "Nikolae, in the name of wizards everywhere, I award you the highest honor we can give you." Smigeon stepped forward without fear and placed the medal around the vampire's neck. "And tell your friends in Romania that they are welcome here anytime. I have some medals for them as well if they'd care to visit."

"I will relay the invitation. I thank you, Minister, the honor is mine." Nikolae bowed in the old fashion and returned to his seat amidst thunderous applause.

"And finally, I have to say this was an even bigger surprise to me than the vampire." He smiled and continued. "I guess it goes to show that we should never judge only by resemblance to what we have known. It also shows that we may find our greatest allies in the most unlikely of places." Smigeon cleared his throat and announced the name with loud, clear resonance. "*Draco Malfoy.*"

Draco appeared shocked to have heard his name. The crowd gasped and whispers erupted like steam escaping. Malfoy looked confused as he was pushed to his feet by those around him, ejected into the aisle. Slowly he made his way to the podium.

"Don't be so surprised, Mr. Malfoy. You deserve this honor more than anyone here. You were held in the Dark Lord's lair for nearly a year, tortured, threatened, killed and revived. You were forced by him to commit acts of evil you would never consider. A muggle hospital full of children was slaughtered when you failed to kill a beloved friend."

Draco's eyes closed with the pain of remembrance.

"Yet you returned to him as a double agent, you endured it all again, the suffering, the torture. Your scull was broken by force."

"Twice, actually."

"All to lure Lord Voldemort into battle with the Order of the Phoenix. Your selfless act surpasses even that of the vampire's Draco. Why? Because he knew he would live. You expected no such luck. It has been told to me by several wizards that you did not expect to come back alive. I have to say, that would have been my guess as well. However, when you were brought to the ensuing battle, you fought against your captors and played a key role in the destruction of Voldemort."

"Well..."

"However, your story does not end there. As a traitor, you were abducted by Death Eaters and barely survived. I'm rather glad you did because it is my deepest honor to pronounce you a Wizard 1st Class by full urging of the Order of Merlin and to award you the Minister's Medal of Heroism. Draco Malfoy, you have surpassed the legacy of your family name to become a hero in the eyes of every wizard who hears that name from this day forth." Smigeon placed the medal around Draco's neck to the sounds of applause as all present stood in ovation.

Draco, overcome by the minister's words, didn't know what to do, but felt he should say something.

"Um... party at Potter's house following the ceremony. Thank you."

* * *

"Well," Harry admitted as the party raged around them, "We did have plenty of Swill left."

"Well save some for when Hermione and I get married!" Ron grinned.

"Next June!" Hermione chimed in. "Only no battles!"

"What are *your* plans, Malfoy?" Harry wondered.

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"You asked me once what I would do if I was free to do as I pleased, Potter. My answer is still the same. I'll be leaving in the morning. Thought I'd wander around Europe, maybe check out Romania while I'm at it." Christina stiffened by his side. Draco took her hand and squeezed it. "I think I'll take Chris to get a drink."

"Well, don't leave without saying goodbye!" Sara shouted as they turned away.

As soon as they were far enough from the others, Draco turned to Christina and took her hands in his.

"You're leaving."

"Yes."

"When were you going to tell me? I'll miss you, Draco. You don't know how it felt when you were in danger. I thought I'd never see you again and it was a *horrible* thought."

"I want you to come with me."

"Are you serious?" She smiled, but couldn't believe he would extend such an offer. "I can make all the arrangements for you." She said, considering why he might want her along. "Make sure you're reservations are made and all that."

"No no. Christina. I want you to *come with me*. Not as my personal assistant. As my *friend*. As my..."

He found he was nervous and at a loss for words. He touched her face and brushed his fingers through her hair. "We can stay at my house tonight. In the morning we'll take the train to France and... I have so *much* to tell you."

"Just tell me this isn't a joke, Draco. That's all I want to hear."

"Then you don't want to hear that I love you?"

"You... Draco, I feel the same way! But how could you love someone like me? You're rich, you could have anyone!"

"But I want *you*. And if you like me at all you'll take pity on me right now. All this sappy stuff is making me feel like an idiot and Potter is going to laugh like crazy..."

"Shut up, Draco. Just kiss me."

"That part I'm good at." He smiled and did as she asked.